Private Life of Catherine the Great

by Princesse Lucien Murat

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The private life of Catherine the Great of Russia

PRIVATE LIFE OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

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Love Lives of the Great

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF CATHERINE THE GREAT OF RUSSIA

By the PRINCESSE LUCIEN MURAT

Translated by GARNETT SAFFERY

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THE PRIVATE LIFE OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

THE FOREST–CLEARING

BEFORE the war, on the fifteenth of August old style, there was celebrated the birthday of the Grand-Duchess Maria, aunt of Tsar Nicolas. We had been invited to share her picnic-luncheon in the woods adjoining St. Petersburg; we, that is to say, her friends from France, her ladies-in-waiting, something like fifty people. The clearing was a festive sight; the Grand-Duchess was all smiles, while we laughed to do her pleasure. The cloth was spread on the grass, and a service of gold ornamented with the Imperial eagles lay about in straggling disorder, trampling and bending aside crow's-foot violets and daisies. Through the firs a squeaky sound of fifes, blended with the rat-tat-tat of drums, roused the locusts from their deep sleep. Clothed in blouses of amaranth-purple, the sharpshooters of the Guard, a noisy crew, came pouring out into the light-flooded opening, and singing as they

marched. A group of peasant-folk drew near, holding each other's hands. Timid, grave in bearing, they danced before us. Russia presented to the eye the illusion of gaiety.

The Grand-Duchess, seated on damask cushions, assigned us to our places with gracious gestures, according to her preferences. Her dress of foulard, edged with ruching done in the shops of the Rue de la Paix, fell in light folds; her bodice fitted tightly over a bust that had been an object of admiration, and outlined a pair of exquisitely rounded shoulders. A small hat of black straw was perched unpretentiously on her fringe of curls. Fawn-coloured eyes, and a mouth that betrayed an affectionate nature, invited your confidence. She was said to be ambitious. As she was near to the throne, she kept her longings hid, doubtless fearing people might guess the dreams that haunted her typically German brow. Obsessed by motherly pride, she crowned her sons with her hopes, and, proud of their masculine beauty, she kept looking at Cyril, Boris, and Andrew, stretched on the grass beside her; nor ever guessed what was to be their fate.

How far off the Revolution seemed! The year was 1913. The ladies-in-waiting, Mme Olive and Princess Gargarin, enlivened the meadow-patch with their innocent muslin-frocks. The Prince de Beauvan by his witty

and satirical utterances made Maria Pavlovna homesick for the Hotel Continental, the stalls of Montmartre and the springs of Vittel. On the eve of its disappearance this frivolous society broke into bloom with flowers of measured elegance. To-day, it seems to us almost as far-removed as that of the eighteenth century.

The band, playing in double-quick time, nearly drove us deaf.

The Grand-Duke Cyril was practising rifle-shooting at empty bottles. His skill scattered them in bits through the indigo sky. I had drawn near to Maria Pavlovna, and on my congratulating her on the ballet improvised before our eyes, she replied: "In this country of ours, everything is improvisation; nothing changes; the present is married to the past, either by heedlessness or perhaps by forgetfulness."

Thinking of her own youth, and mingling, she too, the past with the present, she went on, her eyes half-closed: "I recall an anecdote which was related to me on the occasion of my arrival in Russia. Crossing the garden one summer's day, Prince Bismarck, while he was Ambassador at St. Petersburg, ran into a sentinel on duty and posted in the very middle of the green-sward. Now what might he possibly be guarding? It surely was not the virtue of yonder marble Venus on which a dove was chastely hunting for odd pickings. The diplo-

mat, who was fond of pursuing the leadings of his curiosity, asked an explanation of the matter of my father-in-law, the Emperor Alexander. Inquiries were set on foot. The cause was unknown, but the order was found to be hallowed by age and tradition. From research piled on research we ended by discovering that Catherine the Great, having noticed at this spot a snow-drop, that harbinger of spring, had given orders to have the frail blossom protected. The flower had faded, the Empress was no more, and yet, all through these hundred years, the sentries had been unconcernedly carrying out their duty of watching over it, tramp, tramp, tramp!

"In Russia, tradition is everlasting. Take a look at my guests: their forebears used to gambol about beneath these same shade-trees. Their faces are like the faces of those who have gone before; only the fashions, still, as always, imported from Paris, invented by Mme Bertin or Paul Poiret, follow the new whimsies and keep changing. When hair was powdered, and hoop-petticoats swelled dresses out, were hearts any the lighter? I doubt it. If each of us were to relate the memories culled from our cradle-time, nurse's lullaby or chamberlain's doting drivel, the past might spring to life again. This open space in the woods was always the rendez-vous where we met for the hunt.

Here, near where these roads cross, Catherine the Great listened for the first time to a declaration of love.

" Was she sentimental, passionate, or solely ambitious, this Empress come from Germany at the age of fifteen to extend the empire of The Russias and to mould it to suit herself? Look at her statue in the Nevski Prospect. Her ministers, her lovers, her generals, reconciled with one another in bronze, serve as pedestal to their Imperial Mistress who does anything but jest with the sceptre stretched above their heads. Her renown dazzles us, her weaknesses astonish us, and we pause affrighted on the threshold of her alcove."

I

MATRIMONIAL FORTUNE

ON the twenty-first of August 1744, at ten o'clock in the forenoon, the chimes of Our Lady of Kazan, making a mighty din above the green roof, had proclaimed the marriage of Peter von Holstein, hereditary Grand-Duke of Russia, with Sophia von Anhalt-Zerbst, baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church under the name of Catherine Alexiewna.

The heavy coronet of diamonds dug a deep red groove in Catherine's bulging forehead, and she was suffering from a severe headache, when the Empress Elizabeth delivered her from the weighty gems. Nothing was smarter and prettier than the bridal chamber, hung with cloth of silver heavily flowered with nosegays one felt tempted to gather. How sumptuous was the bed, covered with velvet of poppy-red hue embroidered with wreaths of silver in massy relief! all so new, so brilliant and sparkling! Catherine gazed in astonishment at the pomp so lavishly spread out for her, but her

The King's Libra

pride let nothing of her amazement appear. The Master of Ceremonies, the Marshal of the Court, and the Lord High Chamberlain withdrew backwards, and bowed till they almost touched the floor.

The next procedure was the formal retirement or bridal-bed-of-state, to which only the ladies were admitted. The Princess of Hesse, greatly agitated by emotion, put the night-gown on the young bride and then tucked her neatly in the bed of state. Seeing her worn with fatigue, so frail and somewhat fearful, she would have liked to kiss her, but what would etiquette have said of this? The dressing-gown was very fetching, with all sorts of gew-gaws befitting the virginal estate. The Grand-Duke then made his appearance, trigged out in similar attire, fine lawn, laces and white bow-knots. Heavens! how ugly he was without his wig! Pitted and marked with small-pox, his face all swollen, his eyes keeping up a constant blinking, he looked more like Frederick's monkey than "Cherub," whose only quality he shared, alas! was youth. The Empress Elizabeth, in an affectionate mood, a threat of tears in her eyes, gave her blessing to the newly-wed pair and patted their reddening cheeks. The *freiline* or maids-of-honour made three deep curtsies and left the imperial couple alone with each other.

The great day was at an end at last. Catherine's dream was coming true. Before God, the Boiards, and the serfs, she was Grand-Duchess, wife of the heir-apparent. The aromatic incense she had breathed in the cathedral had gone to her head and was making it oddly tipsy. Was it really she, little Sophie, so flattered by all these lords? Was it she who had heard her name chanted forth in a concert of voices that carried her away, far from the sad Lutheran church where but lately she used to recite her psalms in German? It was easier to adopt this voluptuous liturgy than to suit herself with this husband of hers who was already snoring. Although she'd scarce any illusions, her self-love was wounded. During their long engagement he had never succeeded, by a single gush of emotion, in drawing out her tender feelings. If she were being scolded by the Empress, he would be laughing in his sleeve, and would take sides against his betrothed, for he was by nature sly. He had not changed a whit since their first meeting at the home of their cousin, the bishop of Lubeck. At this interview Catherine was ten years old and Peter one year older. The nasty boy had got drunk in her honour and had pinched her on the calves of the legs, making gleeful faces the while. Not one of the guests at this family banquet of the Holsteins and the Anhalts had

dreamed that the young scamp who was behaving so badly at the end of the table was destined to be called to St. Petersburg by his aunt, the Empress Elizabeth, as heir to her crown, and that one evening in December 1743 the little cousin Sophie was to be summoned in her turn to share the fortune of the sickly little boy.

Strange destiny of a maid of Germany who reasons like a man, and is already calculating and observant! The very eve of her marriage she wrote in her note-book, before blowing out her candle: " My heart does not foretell me any great happiness, ambition alone sustains me; but I have the feeling that sooner or later I shall end up by becoming sovereign of Russia in my own right."

When Catherine awoke after the marriage-night, as ignorant as a nun, her curiosities were still fast asleep and her senses yet slumbered. Peter allowed the weeks to slip by without coaching her in the sportive pastimes of love. When she had fallen asleep he would get into bed with his boots on, and slink away before she was awake, as if he were afraid of her contact. Crouched in a heap against a pile of pillows she sought to escape from the intolerable odour of her spouse. They were strangers to one another.

Sometimes Peter, returning from his drink-

ing-bouts, with a rough slap that might alight on no matter what part of her anatomy, would snatch her from out her pleasant dreams and force her to listen to the detailed and boastful account of his unfaithfulnesses, for he believed himself in love with all sorts of women, excepting his own wife. His preference was for loose wenches and hunchbacks. It is thus that — a thing most unbelievable in the case of the most depraved Court of the century — Catherine preserved her chastity for the space of seven years. Nothing attracted her towards love; indeed the grossness of her husband repelled her from it.

In the society of this quick-tempered and fickle man her pride was in a constant state of irritation. She felt her superior endowments neglected. Her body, smarting under his disdain, became the undeniable accomplice of a revenge whose extent surpassed her calculation. " I wept a great deal " she wrote. " The Empress, seeing that my eyes were red, told me that none but brides who did not love their husbands kept sobbing all the time; had not my Mother assured her that I felt no repugnance at wedding the Grand-Duke? Henceforward, since I was a married woman, I must dry my tears."

Made impatient by an abstinence so con-

trary to custom and to her own example, the Empress finally dictated an order to Mme Tchoglokoff, Catherine's governess: "For the future the Grand-Duchess will be obliged to lend herself with a greater degree of docility to the desires of her husband; let her, if need be, go the length of feigning a certain ardour towards the accomplishment of her wifely duty." On receipt of this imposition, Catherine sighed: "If the Grand-Duke had wished to be loved, the matter would not have been fraught with any difficulty, for I was quite inclined to fulfil my duties." But the Grand-Duke persisted in turning aside from his, and refused to take notice of Catherine's nascent beauty or her many charms that were getting ready to burst into flower.

Two young noblemen, more brazen than the rest, Leo Narushkin and Sergei Soltykoff, inseparable friends, and cousins of Her Majesty, shewed themselves to be sensible of this outflowering of the bud, and jointly evinced their high spirits over it. The former, of a lively and mischievous turn, kept the Lesser Court in a dizzy whirl with his buffooneries and his pranks. As for Sergei, handsome Sergei, he stirred the covetous longings of all the court-dames by his surprising beauty and the harmony of a body that gave to every movement a cat-like grace and spontaneity of which the

most timidly constituted were forced to dream. The Grand-Duke carried his fondness for him to the point of inviting him to share his bed; and Catherine found amusement in looking on at the antics of this gentleman, palpably in love with her and yet seeking to please her by making the pretence of loving her husband to distraction.

Thanks to this stratagem Sergei followed her every step with attentive devotion. In order the more surely to attain the happiness he humbly craved, what scheme would he not have concocted, the hypocrite? Catherine was no fool; she might perhaps have lent a willing ear to his sighs, but she was never alone, as is befitting to a princess of her rank. The seven maids of honour, strewn pell-mell on mattresses on the floor, took their rest at the entrance to her apartments; the duenna kept watch constantly; the keys would not function in the locks or else were lost, and the brightly gleaming eye of some servant that spied on her ever from one door or another was often the stop-gap of any key-hole that might betray an indiscretion. Irritated beyond toleration by this roving eye, Catherine would flee in the early dawn along the marble stairway towards the sea. She went out clad in hunting array, her gun over her shoulder, and leaping into a skiff made off in search of the

migratory fowl that kept wheeling over the Baltic.

Evening would bring her back to the Palace streaming with rain, her hunting-jacket in holes, her face sun-burnt. As soon as day broke next morning she was off again on horseback. She had no happy moments but when hunting, far from her insipid husband who dawdled about in the underbrush, cruelly whipping such of the hounds as had lost their way, in the company of valets whom he made his particular chums. Then, in a fearless mood, she would gallop through the forest; the white birch-boles fled behind her, phantoms of the wood. Nothing gave her more pleasure than the fresh chill of the northland rain that stings, like spray-drifts borne by the wind.

At a cross-roads, one morning, Catherine drew rein and listened. The pack was giving tongue. By what path should she rejoin the Master of the Hounds? A sudden crackling of branches, and the thicket parted. A rider seized her mount by the bridle.

" Sergei, you frightened me," she exclaimed.

The horses brought their heads and shoulders together and rubbed one another affectionately. Catherine had on a sky-blue habit set off with silver galoons, and fastened with buttons of crystal. Sergei Soltykoff looked at her.

In her black hunting-cap she was, at twenty-two, the most attractive of princesses.

"This time you'll not escape me," he said. "Let me love you; you know that I love you passionately. Do you doubt it? Why close my mouth with your hand? I shall make you acquainted, in the deepest secrecy, with all the delights you know not, Madame. Speak, answer me!"

"What audacity! What unspeakable boldness! perhaps my heart is already engaged."

This bit of coquetry fans the flame of his desire, excites his jealousy. He tries to capture and hold a hand that eludes his grasp: "How cruel you are, and how lovely I think you!"

Then Catherine, banteringly:

"You may reap your enjoyment in imagination without my striving to debar you from it."

"I thank you for the permission, Madame, but this sort of pleasure is little to my taste. Look at me, and agree that, without making a coxcomb of myself, I am to be preferred to the rest of these people at Court. Confess that you prefer me."

"I willingly admit that I have a leaning towards you, but, I beg of you, move on and leave me."

"I shall not stir from this spot without

knowing whether I am or am not an object of indifference to you."

The fear of being surprised by other eyes, or perhaps love, dictated the Grand-Duchess' reply. She laughed as she said: " I like you, yes, yes, now go along! "

Sergei let his horse rejoin the hunt. Raising himself in his stirrups, he turned about. Catherine, obstinately shaking her powdered hair, cried out: " No, no! " while he replied in the distance: " Yes, yes! " Destiny is sometimes confined within the bounds of a single syllable.

II

VIRGINITY UNDER CONTROL

"PLEASE, have done with your fooling, I have to have speech with the Grand-Duchess," cried Mme Tchoglokoff, the crochety and queer governess that the Empress had placed over her niece. The faro game was just at an end, and Catherine was making poor work of trying to hide beneath a wry face a fit of laughter which the merry-andrew pranks of Leo Narushkin provoked. This riotous gentleman had the knack of imitating the laughable oddities of Mme Tchoglokoff, and he was for ever taking her off: "This sort of language would not find favour with Her Majesty. This sort of indecorous conduct would never by any possibility be tolerated by the Empress." He was just finishing such a speech, when the governess burst in like a blast of wind.

Catherine found her guardian more than ordinarily comical this evening, and turned away her head so as to avoid the mischievous glances of Narushkin. Mme Tchoglokoff, kept in a continual state of pregnancy by her

respected husband, had been designated by Her Majesty to serve as model to her Imperial ward. It was in vain, however, that she strutted her solemn belly under the eyes of the Grand-Duchess; the example was not contagious. Disappointed, she resolved to add her powers of persuasion to it:

"You know, Madame, what a struggle it would cost me to deceive my husband. Nevertheless, if the good of the country were to exact the surrender of my virtue, I should put my scruples to flight and lend myself cheerfully to that great sacrifice."

She hesitated before going on; the poor thing was almost timid. Catherine, smiling her amusement, begged her to be seated.

Buried in the depths of an easy-chair, the stout lady proceeded with her lesson: "I shall speak without shuffling, Madame. Pray try to comprehend me. Holy Russia expects an heir from you. The Empire requires him, the people is calling for him with its prayers."

Catherine, thunderstruck, let her governess go on with her peroration. She was not without knowledge of the dangers to which she was exposing the dynasty by leaving the Imperial cradle empty. The Russian masses, who had received her with shouts of joy, were already turning away from her. There were whisperings as she passed through the streets: "There

goes our heiress without an heir. Sterile German hussy!" The impatient moujiks were waiting for this child as for a present to which they had a right. Their murmurings could be plainly heard. Catherine risked expulsion from the country. But what was there to be done, alas, since the virility of the Grand-Duke shewed itself in no way?

Dame Tchoglokoff leaned down towards her ear: "Pardon my frankness, there is no doubt but you have in your circle of attendants someone whom you look kindly upon. Choose between Sergei Soltykoff and Leo Narushkin. It seems to me that it is this latter whom you favour."

"No, no!"

"Then choose the other!" concluded Mme Tchoglokoff, quite out of breath.

Catherine is surprised. Her probity rises in revolt. If she has been somewhat of a flirt or has conducted herself in any unconstrained manner, she has at least never bestowed her favours; she lacks the decision to permit herself to understand this move, and suspects her aunt of stretching a pit-fall before her feet. She cares not a fig for the morality-posings of this sovereign whose supper-parties wind up in noisy junketings! Strange example for a young wife who is required to smile respectfully to the favourite of the Empress whenever

she finds him crossing her path! But will tyranny go the length of controlling her secret and instinctive feelings? Does her own body not belong to her? Because her husband disdains her, may she not remain chaste if she so chooses? And now, in the name of moral philosophy, she is invited to take to herself a lover! Perhaps her penitential reflexions are rather agreeable and come at an easy price. Since the day when Soltykoff had made her his confession of love, that handsome face had been haunting her, leaving her unnerved and without strength. Must she stand to her defence, or must she yield?

The governess had barely gone, when the door opened to admit the Chancellor, Bestuzhieff, an old fox with a sharp nose and the mouth of a miser. He comes forward, deferential, crafty and sly, and communicates to her a project decided upon in plenary session of Council, regulating the succession to the throne in case the Grand-Duke were to die.

" You forget, my Lord," interrupts Catherine in her haughtiest manner, " that, even granted I have no children, I still remain associated with the Crown. How dare you use such language to me? I shall enter a complaint."

" And to whom will you address your com-

plaint, Madame? To those who sent me? I am here to take orders from Your Imperial Highness. May Your Highness deign to allow me to bring Count Soltykoff to visit you."

What repeated assaults upon a chastity already wavering!

Provoked by all these exhibitions of remissness, the Empress summons the governess and reprimands her roundly. "You do not know how to set to work to deal with these snivelling brats. In days gone by we did not stand so much on ceremony. No woman with any brains ever dies without an heir." These words are reported to Catherine, and she decides to pass them on to Sergei Soltykoff that very evening. At this meeting they swear together, lip to lip, like faithful subjects to carry out to the letter the Empress's instructions. Catherine, submitting to the edict, develops a passionate fondness for the man who had pursued her in the woods; whose mouth has the flavour of a ripened raspberry, and whom she has orders to love.

She then gives herself up without scruple to her natural inclination. But if her heart is a cage of singing birds, if her senses leap to awakened life with an impetuosity which never ceases to surprise her, she is too well acquainted with the shady character of her husband and with the caprices of the Em-

press, who changes her mind more frequently than she does her lovers, not to fear the future.

Alas! what would be the result of all this? Love upset her completely. She was in a quandary. Would her husband adopt the child of another man, considering the fact that he knew that an obstacle, which he believed irremediable, prevented him from being a father? She must at all costs, by dint of entreaties and caresses, lull his suspicions and persuade him to submit to an operation at the hands of a clever surgeon.

No one dared broach a subject so bristling with difficulties, for fear of incurring his disfavour. The Empress having learnt that Soltykoff alone had enough ascendancy over the Grand-Duke to subdue his obstinacy, begged the former to urge the matter forcibly upon him.

But Peter was so afraid of the knife that he trembled at the bare thought of it. His limited imagination fell far short of visualizing the unforgetable delights which Soltykoff in his capacity of expert so highly extolled for his benefit. Was he a hypospadiac from birth, or a candidate for the oriental rite of circumcision from which St. Paul spared us? Was it a question of deft incision or of simple amputation? History is silent on the point. The

operation was decided upon in a twinkle. Hurriedly carried through to the accompaniment of the clink of glasses, it served as the interlude of a little supper-party.

Peter was this evening less intoxicated and more sociable than was his custom. Taking advantage of this propitious mood of the Grand-Duke's, Dr. Boerhaave, chief surgeon to the Court, made a solemn entrance preceded by singers and violins. He glided beneath the table, and with a dextrous twist of his hand removed from the Grand-Duke the bar to his pleasures, to the tune of the loud applause of Soltykoff who smashed glasses wholesale by his vigorous stamping. The next day Soltykoff received as his reward, from the hands of Her Gracious Majesty, an exceptionally large diamond.

In vain Catherine tried to put a damper on her love affair; every look betrayed her. Soon the intrigue got noised abroad to the extent of reaching the ears of the city. It became the subject of gossip. Soltykoff's envious acquaintances, jealous of his unhoped-for luck, tattled to Peter that the pair of lovers had made a fool of him; that the operation was but a ruse to cover his misfortune. They raised mistrust in his vacillating mind by their insinuations.

Peter was a brute, a coxcomb, but not a fool.

No sooner had the suspicion taken hold of him than he resolved, in order to bring the yelping of this pack of curs to a stop, to demand a striking proof of Catherine's chastity. The art of dealing expertly with the complications incident to the hymeneal couch was a matter of household practice in Russia: for this purpose a special little casket was always placed among the wedding presents.

Every woman, when danger is imminent, finds some clever way out, and Catherine was of an ingenious turn of mind. So, the day following that on which she was married for good, Peter nearly exploded with pride at being able to forward to the Empress a little package sealed with the Imperial coat of arms. A few days after this, Catherine became aware of some of the minor discomforts of the pregnant condition.

At this period of history it was the custom to leave newly delivered women without any nursing care whatever, even in palaces. The Grand-Duchess lay all alone in a tiny room exposed to all the draughts of chilly September. Burning with fever, she kept begging for water. Not a soul answered her calls. She went from hot to cold in her wet night gown. She burst into a flood of tears; and yet Paul

Petrovitch, Grand-Duke of All the Russias, had just come into the world.

They had carried away her child. Whom did he look like? Her temples throbbed. She leaned her hand against her tired, tired forehead. She saw herself once more a little girl in Stettin, the city of Pomerania. Her parents' house stood with its back towards the gothic church; the bells thrust their tongues forth from the belfry to call the faithful. It was Christmas-time. Sophie, surrounded by her little playmates, was singing:

"*Fir-tree, my lovely fir-tree, how green thy leaves do show,*" and she danced around the resinous boughs that were lighted up by tiny tapers of pink and white and blue, glow-worms amid the hoarfrost.

The Prince von Zerbst was not rich, but between campaigns he took pleasure in returning to have a peep at his happy little brood, and never came without having his horse laden with dainty tit-bits. Folded in the paper-wrapping of a chocolate-sweet these nonsense rhymes had been found by Sophie, to her intense delight:

Not o'er a single heart my fair one's rule is spread;
Queen of an empire vast, she'll turn each giddy head.

"Papa, papa, little Sophie is to be a queen!" The Prince fondled the child with his ruddy hands. "How pretty you are, little daughter, with your wee green hunting-jacket, your striped skirt and your sweet little face with a wisp of lace to set off its airy-fairiness!" Sophie led off the other children to the kitchen, the pretty gleaming and spotless kitchen where the roast goose stood smoking; the little epicures took up the chorus:

"*You sneak-thief, fox, where's our white goose?*
"*Give back the stolen fowl, be quick!*
"*If not, there's many a hunter's trick,*
"*Old fox, will take you in a noose.*"

The city of Stettin, where she had spent so many hours of her youth, lay under its mantle of snow, with its roofs shaped like a bishop's mitre, and its gutter-spouts to which the clinging icicles hung like pointed billy-goat beards. The favorite walk was around the giant linden-tree. Sophie, in mischievous mood, threw snow-balls at her German teacher, Herr Wagner. Twenty times a day Mlle Cardel, her French governess, used to call her by the diminutive which was her every-day sobriquet: "*Fichen,* draw your chin back; *Fichen,* you are going to run into some

one going by; anyway, you little goose, you'll never come to anything."

She heard her father, on the eve of her departure for Russia, making her his farewell speech. The words " tomfooleries," " familiarities," " *Regierungs-sachen* (state affairs) " kept colliding with each other in his parting recommendations. Then she saw Berlin once more, King Frederick so droll with his piercing gimlet-eyes, his walking-stick and his three-cornered hat; and the road, the long white causeway over which she sped by the side of her mother, who kept up a stream of chatter, building vast projects, knitting all sorts of tangled intrigues in advance, and doubtless thinking of her betrothal to the Grand-Duke. . . .

The pain made her groan as she lay in her bed. At the thought of her child she was moved to tenderness, placed her hands upon her engorged breasts, and turned towards the ikon. The Byzantine Virgin smiled across the reddening flame and shewed her the Divine Child on her knees. Catherine saw in a flash that the greatness of Russia rested upon a credulous faith. This people of devotees made a strong appeal to her; she would seek to win it over. By a marvel of will-power had she not learnt its singing speech? Before the eyes of the youthful Princess there passed in review

the far-off pictures of her arrival in Russia. The fever that scorched her coloured her visions with a vivacity, an intensity that bordered on the realms of faery and night-mare.

. . . Here looms up Riga, where begin the hand-kissings, the deep curtseyings, the dazzling uniforms. On, on to St. Petersburg, in the great scarlet sledge with its filigree-work of solid silver and its lining of sable; how easy it was to give oneself up to dreams, riding in it! Stage succeeds stage with ravenous speed. Now we reach St. Petersburg, and with sixteen horses harnessed to it our sledge goes flying at a breakneck pace over the wide highway, the snowflakes blinding our vision but failing to get under the masks that protect our faces from the cold. At last Moscow comes into view. . . . St. Basil, the church that puts one in mind of a cluster of pine-apples, with its brilliant domes cut into many facets, covered with scale-work of gold, and bearing on tall cylindrical shafts the double crosses of Byzantium before which Sophie was on her way to bow the knee. In the grip of child-bed fever, the young woman could see pistachio-nuts, bulbs and battlemented green-tinted walls running one after the other and jumbling together, while the red splash of the stairway seemed to climb right up to heaven, and the sacred images danced in groups beneath the

vaults over which the tall wax-tapers shed a flickering light. Catherine was delirious.

As she broke into a throaty laugh she thought it was the echo of the monstrous coronation-bells she heard. Ivan the Terrible, Boris Godunov, and Peter the Great, legendary sovereigns and heroes of Muscovite annals crowded about her and pressed upon her sceptres, golden sconces, tiaras of emerald and *kakoshniks* of pearls. She had forgotten her childhood in Germany. She would be Empress; she was Russian. Another and different woman was bursting the veil of being! She set about taking cognizance of her spiritual freedom just as she had acquired a knowledge of the mysteries of love, the year before, one cold night, beneath the fur-wrappings, what time her mouth, in obedience to love's behest, had given vent to her first expression of passion's joy and passion's pain.

✣

Forty days after her lying-in, her son was brought to her for the first time. The Empress was madly infatuated with the boy. The mother scarce had the right to touch the child as it lay in its cradle swaddled in flannels and covered with black-fox skins. She fixed her wondering gaze upon it. The boy had the well-developed forehead and the arched eye-

brows of Sergei Soltykoff; later on he came heir to the gloomy disposition and the fantastic devotion to soldiering that Peter possessed. Did Catherine know which one was the child's father? This is a mystery that soars beyond our reach. She took care, anyway, not to let herself learn to love the infant; her destiny lay along other paths, hers was not the heart of a mother. But still she felt a twinge of pain at not having been allowed to hear the first weak wailings of this her newly-born, to whose innocent fondlings, moreover, she dare lay no claim, for fear of incurring the displeasure of Her Majesty.

Fireworks, in repeated displays, were given in honour of the christening. Still by no means well, isolated and unhappy as she was, Catherine had been given one hundred thousand roubles and a rather second-rate set of jewels as a reward for bringing this child into the world.

Now that she was a mother, Sergei no longer had any right to come near her. The court orders had become very strict. Not a soul, henceforth, should be allowed to have access to the Grand-Duchess' apartments without a pass from the Lady Governess.

Although her capacity for feeling was merely skin-deep, Catherine was possessed of a keenness of the senses that kept her on edge;

and Sergei was her first lover. In the sequence of time, as the event showed, a great many gallants were destined to follow one another in a serried row and claim each his share in her glory; but never did her senses cease to thrill with gratitude to Soltykoff, their earliest arouser, nor ever did they forget him; for his memory was closely knit with her associations of maidenly modesty and virgin chastity.

At twenty-three, Catherine still believed in fidelity. Whenever she uttered Soltykoff's name, her heart was all of a flutter: "Sergei, Sergei," she kept on repeating, looking through the window-panes at the garden with its covering of snow on which every object makes an impression; on which no impression lasts. Who was keeping him from her? The separation was becoming intolerable; her high-strung nervous mechanism, now roused to action, refused to silence its clamour.

Soon afterwards she learnt by a messenger that Her Majesty had chosen Soltykoff as ambassador extraordinary to announce to the King of Sweden the birth of her son.

III

THE DANCE OF THE METAMORPHOSES

EVERYTHING was upside-down. The Tsarina Elizabeth had had the bright idea of giving what she was pleased to call the Metamorphosis Ball, in which the sexes were travestied. Such a dancing-party, while causing the heads of the frolicsome younger set to turn giddy with pleasurable anticipation, put a goodly number of the staider element in bad humour. Catherine had kept away from all social entertainments during the time of her churching and for as long as Soltykoff's absence from Court had lasted; but learning that he had that very morning returned from Sweden, she made up her mind to put in an appearance at the ball, in the costume of a Greek shepherd.

Nothing could have been more comical as a spectacle than this festivity. Imagine the dignified Chancellor Bestuzhieff, his stubby wig fitting tight atop the yellow forehead of an elderly shepherdess, while certain tag-ends of artificial tresses termed *confidantes* hung in

corkscrew curls over his ears. The human comedy laid bare the foibles and the laughable oddities of every single guest. Catherine set herself out to please all comers, accepting the homage of ladies-of-the-bed-chamber rigged out as scapegrace young lady-killers, or the pressing attentions of generals transformed into dragon-fly ballet-dancers.

A woman caught in the snares of love and yet deprived of the object of her desires is more lonely at a masquerade than she'd be if she were lost in the prairie wastes.

Catherine would have liked to be able, while keeping her own identity a secret, to take a close look at the varied endowments of these people that whirled about her and bowed their heads as they went by. In this circling maze where vice disguised itself with paint and rouge, these Slavs, civilized but yesterday, danced with a grace the most seductive and a wild freedom that inspired one with fear. How easy a task it would be to dominate them! It would need no more than a trifling show of friendly interest and a power of will that should renew its fixity of purpose with each succeeding day. On more than one point she determined to take her aunt as model, but she resolved to bring to bear on the domain of pleasure and social pastime, not the allurements of fancy and imaginative appeal, but her

own personal method, that good German method according to which every man, even in the arms of his mistress, must serve a definite end and design.

Such were the thoughts Catherine was turning over in her mind, when an eddy in the crowd brought her face to face with Her Majesty. Though the latter had merely an intermittent sort of liking for Catherine, she nevertheless smiled at her now with the haughty ease possessed only by a woman in power.

The Empress was triumphant, in her velvet gown of the shade of Spanish snuff and embroidered with mosaics of emeralds and sapphires. She had the prettiest leg in the world, the most exquisitely arched instep, and danced the minuet to perfection.

"How fortunate it is," said Catherine, "that you are not a man, for you would turn all our heads!"

"If I were one," replied the Empress as she kissed her niece on the cheek, "I should present the apple to you!"

Then Elizabeth, turning away, proffered her hand to be kissed by a slim dragoon in green uniform, who was the main attraction of all curious eyes. This travesty was worn by a newly-arrived French lady, a stranger at Court who gave her name as Mlle Leah de Beaumont.

The orchestra, conducted by Locatelli, opened with a pastourelle. Elizabeth hummed gaily as she carried off the stranger. This eager alacrity of attention, quite at variance with etiquette, gave the English Minister, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, a regular fit of indignant dismay, since he could not see without mistrust a French woman insinuate herself into close intimacy with the Russian sovereign, and that, too, by a mere caper. He complained of the incident, and not without bitterness, to his confidant the young Count Poniatowski, whom he had fetched back from Poland to make use of his services, to what end he himself did not yet know. Poniatowski kept looking stealthily at Catherine who, half cooked by the heat, had let her mask fall.

Leah came from Versailles, charged with a mission the nature of which was a mystery to everyone. She whispered to the Empress:

" Madame, do not betray my secret, I pray you; I am the messenger chosen to renew with Your Majesty the relations that were recently broken off. Under cover of this disguise I have succeeded in getting within ear-shot of your Majesty."

" Then you are not a woman? "

" That matters little, madame, the secret is the King's. I am the secret bearer, outside the

jurisdiction of His Majesty's Chancellery, of a letter written by His own hand."

Elizabeth motioned to her to say no more. Williams was making his way towards them with a view to overhearing their conversation. She waived him aside, and turning to Leah she said:

" During your stay in St. Petersburg you will have quarters in the Palace; I shall appoint you my reader. This office gives you the right to enter my private apartments at all hours. This very evening my lady-in-waiting Maria Shuvaloff will open the doors to you."

When the Empress withdrew from the Ball of Metamorphoses the wan northern daylight was sloping through the upper windows. The dawn's faint pinkish rays roused from its slumber the bell-tower of the cathedral of St.-Peter-and-Paul.

Elizabeth cherished the dream that her heart would one day lie in peace in this sacred edifice beside the remains of Tsar Peter the Great, her father. With a feeling of sadness she looked at her face. The mirror was little inclined to flatter her, for the powder had mostly blown away and quite failed to hide her fast-greying hair, while the high wines of Hungary had scattered blotches on her bedizened cheeks that showed their wrinkles beneath the paint.

As she was full of superstitions, she was afraid to be alone, dreading a possible revolution, a number of which she had seen at close range. In order to invite sleep to her couch, a half-dozen women were kept busy tickling her with a light touch, from her big-toe to her heel. These watchers of the night fled in dismay when Leah made her entrance, dressed in a gown of fine lawn and her feet encased in satin slippers.

The room was lighted by candles that burnt in a circle around the ikon of St. Elizabeth.

"There you see my patron saint," said the Empress, making the sign of the cross thrice. "Since the day of my birth she has been granting me her protection. She it is who sends you."

Leah, meanwhile, was at her wits' end what saint to invoke, and her confusion gave her an added grace. The Sovereign's eyes sparkled. She was fascinated and intrigued by this dragoon that could change his sex with so much of a virtuoso's dexterity, and lose no whit of charm in the process. Pulling up her skirts, the pretty messenger, with the gesture of a winged mercury, drew from her shoe, with one swift skilful motion, the letter of the King her master. Ingenious stratagem that made the Empress marvel! In this precarious and slippery century intrigue had torn the bandage

from Love's eyes and made sport of its surprises. Elizabeth wheedled the beauteous visitant and with a wandering and exploring hand sought to solve the enigma of this Leah de Beaumont. . . . But the Chevalier d'Eon, true to his rôle of androgynous diplomat, — for the Imperial curiosity's aggressive moves were not directed against a young maiden — was ill disposed to submit to her scrutiny. With lowered eye-lids he put some distance between himself and the Tsarina; she on her part insisted with a degree of obstinacy that he come within her reach. Was he then a marble hermaphrodite? His friend Grécourt used to say: " What an icicle! I take it you were kneaded out of snow, you can walk through a red-hot fire without getting a goose-flesh. What are you? Angel or woman? For of a dead certainty you are not a man!" Edging backwards, he stretched out his dimpled cheeks towards her. Elizabeth caught him with one swift grab, made a manual inspection of him in a twinkling, passed her hands affectionately over his chin which she found covered with a light down as soft as that of a peach, and invited him to join her in drinking a glass of Cyprus wine, while she herself emptied the decanter at a single gulp. D'Eon tells us that at this moment he thought he saw before him " a starved bacchante with bluish

lips and cheek-bones flaming red, whose very skin sweated lasciviousness," and at the sight of this Imperial ruin he gathered up his skirts and beat a hasty and terrified retreat.

To deceive an Empress, and to trick a woman at the same time, — who ever heard of such temerity? If you wish to add to her displeasure, flee her just at the moment when she is ready to surrender herself at your discretion!

In spite of his cynicism, the Chevalier is afraid of the dungeons that border the treacherous Neva, those deep pits wherein the water has the habit of rising noiselessly. He thinks, too, of far-off Siberia, of eyes put out, and noses split in twain. Under this clement Sovereign, the death penalty is abolished, but was not Eudoxia Lapukin, whose sole crime was her beauty, punished by having her tongue bored through by a red-hot iron and her buttocks torn to shreds by twenty strokes of the cat-o'-nine-tails? Elizabeth does not jest when her jealousy is aroused.

But this evening she has not been the only one to be forsaken; her niece is still on the look out for the faithless Soltykoff. How the hours seem to her to drag! How many times she tries the door! What emotions she falls prey to, and what numberless irritations! Every time a sleigh-bell tinkles in the frosty air, her

hope revives once more; but the sledges slip swiftly on their way and go by.

Exasperated by her fruitless waiting, her throat bared to the cold, her hair still curled in the style of a Greek Swain, amidst a medley of overturned powder-boxes, little jars and perfume-bottles, the Grand-Duchess strives to assay the character of the man she loves. How frothy-light he seems to her now! Would she have fallen into love's snare if he had not spoken to her of love? At every creak of a stair, since she does not wish to believe him indifferent, she gets ready to grant him his pardon in her arms. Slowly the night keeps slipping away. Then, with her heart in a tumult of passion, she sees another face come stealing between her and the recreant lover. It is the face of the gloomy and mysterious Pole she had glimpsed at the ball; who had kept listening to her with such a troubled expression on his features, and whose romantic temperament Sir Charles Williams had vaunted to her with an undeniably strange degree of warmth.

The next day she is told that Soltykoff had allowed himself to be carried away to a masonic lodge-meeting, where he had promptly forgotten her. Too proud to make any complaint, she consoles herself with Bayle's Dictionary. In spite, however, of the attractions of philo-

sophy, her tears trickle down and fall on the dry pages. She writes in her secret [1] memoirs: "The pride of my spirit rendered the idea of being unhappy intolerable to me. If you feel unhappiness approach you, lift yourself above it. So shape your course that your happiness depend on no event outside of yourself."

But although Catherine the Empress has shared with Marcus Aurelius the glory of governing mankind, the moral philosophy of Epictetus escapes Catherine the Grand-Duchess. She imagined, poor woman, that in order to be mistress of her own happiness, all she had to do was to change lovers.

[1] These memoirs have been lent me by the Comte Stanislas de Castellane, who owns the manuscript once the property of the Prince de Talleyrand. I have drawn largely from it for the documentary grounding of this little work. — AUTHOR'S NOTE.

IV

KING OF HEARTS

EUROPE, as well as Catherine, is fickle; for she, too, changes her relations. The old alliances are abandoned in favour of new whimsies. While Russia pouts at her neighbour Prussia, Frederick II blows an air on his flute, and Austria throws her arms around the neck of France, her old-time rival. Dispatch-riders leap across the various frontiers. Empresses and female plotters shuffle the cards with their pretty fingers. And while the all-powerful Pompadour sends gifts of Sèvres porcelain to the pious Maria Theresa, Elizabeth returns to Louis XV, with the most honied promises, his engaging messenger.

Decidedly the Palace of St. Petersburg smelled of gunpowder. The Chevalier d'Eon in headlong haste packed up his under-petticoats, uniforms and suits, and returned in triumph to Versailles. In spite of his haste he desired to lull the mistrust of Catherine, that demure-looking person who alone had guessed his mission.

During the concert, to the harmonies born of harpsicords and viols, he took leave of her with a flourish of overblown compliments that bordered on impertinence. But she, too proud to listen to humbug and nonsense, set herself against yielding to the charm of this Ganymede and replied in terms so sharp as to force him to retire quite nonplussed. Whereupon he lost no time in taking his revenge by painting for posterity the following portrait in which all flattery was forgotten:

" How fascinating was her glance, like the gaze of some wild animal! What a terrifying future is written, unless I am greatly mistaken, on that lofty brow of hers! When she drew near me, I was wont to recoil by an instinct which I could not master. It makes one feel that her hand, though engaged but in caressing, is a tigress' paw that will tear to shreds. And yet her mouth is ever smiling; it spreads fear; 'tis a diabolical grin. As for her bitter laughter, she shoots it forth, she darts it tellingly. It wounds almost as deeply as her sarcasms. The pupil of Sir Charles Williams is worthy of her master. But perhaps my bias blinds me."

Was Catherine unkind, or merely a teasing sprite, to this little imp who ran about behind doors in petticoats and leapt into beds like a proper man? For some months past she

had been so racked with nervousness! Her dearth of interests, her disillusionment in the matter of love, the ravages made upon her health by a precipitate labour,— all the physical inconveniences and the moral annoyances that had been gratuitiously heaped up around her, predisposed her, gay and courageous though she was by nature, to a hypochondriacal condition, the neurasthenia of those days. She had good cause to be cross-grained in disposition, what with her unfaithful lover, and the behaviour of Sir Charles Williams, who never ceased attempting, by his underhand intrigues, to turn her political affections towards England; nay, he even paid his way into her good graces without any haggling at the price.

At the Palace high stakes were played for, and Catherine was recklessly extravagant, bestowing upon her ladies and her maids-in-waiting costly presents and jugs of wine with the view to making them her creatures. This was not philanthropy, but cleverness on her part. At St. Petersburg it was common practice to buy up consciences. Everyone had his price, and for some time past, marvellous to relate! the louis had been piling up in golden pyramids on the green baize of the gaming table. If the Empress had twelve thousand dresses in her ward-robe done in sandal-wood

partition-work, and was in the habit of sending to Paris to match a bit of shot-silk ribbon or a pointed-toed slipper, she always kept forgetting, on the other hand, to pay her niece's board and lodging. Well, the latter, up to her ears in debt, drew from time to time upon the ever-open purse of her friend from England. Ten thousand livres here, twenty thousand livres there. What disquieting generosity!

To gain access to Catherine, Sir Charles had no need to crave a special audience. He was present at every function, took part in every masquerade, missed not a single supper-party. At the theatre the Master of Ceremonies more often than not reserved him a blue velvet-covered easy-chair next to that of the Grand-Duchess.

Taking advantage of the loud strains of the orchestra, at the first night's performance of "Cephalus and Procris," a Russian opera in which the then prevailing depravity of morals is depicted in detail on the stage, he adroitly flatters her German sympathies, and insensibly, by dint of slanderous stories, alienates her affections from France: "What would she say to an alliance whereby England and Russia should uphold each other? On the signing of the first article of a secret agreement, all the money she might want would find its way into

her private strong box. Does she wish to build a palace, buy a necklace of diamonds, fasten about her snow-white neck a collar of pearls? Does she prefer a turn-out of a carriage and eight bay horses with glistening coats? he will have it sent for from Ireland. Does her desire run to a little negro slave to bear her train on gala-days? or rather perhaps . . ." And now that she smiles and shakes her head, since she refuses all the gems of Golconda, he has guessed what will please her, sly though she is.

He knows by this time that beneath this modest and sprightly exterior is hidden an indomitable force of character. He therefore stirs up her ambition and plays upon her passions. Does she crave a throne? He points out to her the part she may play at this Court, where the Empress drifts undecidedly between her own caprices and the whims of her Chancellor. " Take a look at your Aunt. She seems quite ill; listen to that hysterical cough that reaches us at this distance. I learnt today that her ladies found her in the garden, lying in a dead faint. Before being bled, she was in such a state that her mind wandered. It will not be long before her favourites and the diplomats, who tonight are bowed down and hypnotised by her power, will be turning towards you!"

Catherine's smile leaves her. Then Williams

lays before her the contents of a dispatch he has just deciphered. War is threatening. It will break out tomorrow, God knows where, like a thunderstorm. This bolt of lightning, which will uproot nations, will bring great disorders in its train, if Russia makes a wrong choice of allies. Seeing her distressed look, he presses his arguments home. Since Catherine, in her isolation as regards matters of the heart, is on the lookout for a confidant, let her become his political collaboratress, and he will offer her his friendship in exchange.

Every woman who is embarked on a career of gallantry and feels herself hesitating between a love-affair at its last gasp and a new adventure dimly seen in outline, needs at all costs to talk to someone about it. Under the influence of Sir Charles' sympathetic kindness, Catherine is no longer ashamed of her love-episode and its vexatious conclusion. Why conceal from him what he already knows? She lays bare to him her tactless heart that no longer has the skill to make itself loved. What boots it to her to be Grand-Duchess — when she goes hungry for caresses? Is she less pretty, less desirable than another? Since the birth of her son her figure had become a little stouter, it is true, but this plumpness was no enemy to sensual enjoyment; quite the contrary. It was a soft and feminine charm which was likely

to attract amorous fondlings and give many a thrill to lovers of dimples. Of these Catherine had more than her share, scattered in various quarters of her superficies, and the elderly Englishman would have been happy to pop his finger into a few of them.

Returning confidence for confidence, the Minister then reported to her that in the drawing-rooms of St. Petersburg the one topic of conversation was the indiscreet conduct of Sergei, who was glorying in his gallantries, and spreading Catherine's name abroad in furtive whiperings. How could Soltykoff neglect so adorable a mistress, after having exposed her reputation to so many malicious tongues? An Englishman would have sooner stopped up his mouth with a gag and forced his heart to silence than have bragged and strutted over a conquest crowned with love's high recompense.

" If I were you, Madame, I should forget the wretch. Grant me a smile; and then, we two, we shall bid defiance to Versailles." Without awaiting a reply he turned his head towards her, and forgetful of his crimson-splotch'd face, his wrinkles and his grey-besprinkled hair, he had the bold effrontery to bring his obscene old muzzle close to the pink roses of her cheeks, when, to his utter consternation, he found himself in collision with a mine of anger

on the verge of exploding. Catherine's eyes darted lightnings, and with a blow of her fan she put the diplomat in his place; for, however sportively inclined she might be, she never allowed anyone to be lacking in respect to her. Seized with remorse, and in order to gain pardon for his audacity, Sir Charles resolved to immediately let her have her way with the youthful Count Stanislas Poniatowski, his henchman and tool, to whom from this time forth he would dictate the political instruction he wished Catherine to acquire.

Stanislas was twenty-two. His almond-shaped eyes were slightly near-sighted, and gave him a somewhat gloomy expression. He took great pride in his good looks, particularly his aquiline nose. He scarcely ever passed by a mirror without admiring himself from head to foot. Though his features were of a noble cast and his air possessed distinction, his slouching walk roused a suspicion of effeminacy and made his rather well-developed haunches still more prominent. On the other hand, his countenance carried so much of haughty pride as to command respect and awe. And here was the remarkably odd thing about him: that in a social sphere in which licentious behaviour was the fashion he had walked safely past every trap and snare, his orange-blossom in his hand. What an irony of destiny! he had

managed to preserve his youthful innocence " for her," as he writes in his memoirs, " who has ever since had the ordering of my fate."

He was now making his début in St. Petersburg society with the assets of a body innocent of abuse and a heart no less virginal. His uncle Czartorisky, one of the endlessly-recurring claimants to the throne of Poland, had had the idea of sending him to the Court of Elizabeth whose favour it was important he should gain, at the price of countless flattering attentions. More even than talent and clever resourcefulness a handsome face possesses a power of persuasion. Stanislas, born with a vast and ardent ambition, was open to all that experience had to teach.

Leo and Anna Narushkin took quite a liking to this descendant of the Jagellons, whose arrival followed in the wake of so original a reputation. His dreams of greatness led him to do all in his power to shine in society; his infatuation for all causes, good or bad, quickly marked him out as one to whom the Lesser Court was glad to extend its friendship.

As soon as his back was turned, these two gossips started extolling their young friend to Catherine. They praised to the skies his modesty, his acquaintance with the arts, his fondness for philosophy. Leo concluded the colloquy by whispering softly: " If you are

tempted by such a thing, Madame, I intend to present you with a jewel for which you will thank me." This jewel, who would have believed it? Apparently it was the virgin innocence of Stanislas. The Grand-Duchess had no luck with her gallants.

✣

"Meow! meow!" The harebrained Narushkin is caterwauling at Catherine's door. She leaps awake, highly annoyed. Who dares disturb her while she is taking her rest? Then, recognising her friend's voice, she is amused, and listens. Peter, her husband, is still out. He must have gone to a drinking and smoking party at the guard-house, or he is likely spending the rest of the night in the arms of some mistress. Why has this buffoon Narushkin come to wake her out of her sleep?

"Meow! meow! open, open!" the comical ass insists. Is she to slip back the bolt and let this wolf into the sheep-fold? He is little to be dreaded. Who is afraid of him, anyway? Her shoulders bare, her bosom hidden beneath a dressing-gown hastily wrapped about her, and quickly twisting up her ash-coloured hair, she throws open the door. "Meow! Madame, the sky is overcast, the cats are all grey, 'tis the witching hour meant neither for sleep nor for lonesome nightmare-riding. May Your Im-

perial Highness deign to hear me out. . . . My sister-in-law Anna Narushkin is getting up a little impromptu supper-party tonight in her home on the Islands, set in the midst of the frost-covered firs. A certain number of cats and of rats have agreed to meet there. Flutes will be discoursing their soft strains in the winter-garden where all the roses have burst into bloom in your honour. May Your Highness be so kind as to put on one of your disquietingly lovely costumes! Your bewitching beauty will this evening shed beams of a matchless brightness. And after all, let us play the fool a bit, Madame, youth is passing, life keeps slipping away."

The night was one propitious to gaiety, to flirtations, to flutterings of the heart. The Grand-Duchess went out in headlong haste, muffled up in ermines whiter than the courtyard that lay beneath its powder of hoar-frost. Hurry, coachman! And off she goes in the purple night, across the bridges, under the stars that now light their tapers above her scatterbrained head and her haughty brow.

Arrived at his sister-in-law's abode, Leo, with his three-cornered hat under his arm and a finger on his lips, mysteriously announces: "A friend from Moscow." The two halves of the door are thrown wide. Catherine, dazzled by the light shed in profusion from the

candelabras, sees the handsome Count Poniatowski standing pale, motionless, forgetting in his embarrassment to make the prescribed bow.

But this evening Catherine is indulgent. She would have been ungracious to have taken offense. Never did scheme appear to her more delightful. She smiled, and her mouth sparkled with the moisture of anticipation. A spirit of understanding and " get-together " takes possession of the guests. Stanislas has a presentiment of his coming happiness, trembles at the thought of it, and follows Catherine about like a dog. " The dazzling whiteness of skin of the Grand-Duchess, her remarkably long black eye-brows, and above all a voice with the clear tones of a bell and a laugh that was as merry as her humour," — all these made short work of overcoming his shyness. Couples move up and down like shadows. The assiduously attentive Stanislas carries Catherine's wrap over his arm, while she shivers,— but not with the cold. The silence is drawing them together.

In the porcelain pavilion where diminutive cupids, pink and chubby, cut capers on the walls, Stanislas is leaning on his elbow against the window-recess, close to the Grand-Duchess. How is he to amuse this pretty pedagogue? He paints a picture of Paris, her

eyes scattering sparks the while. What a thrill it gives him to tell her all about Mme de Brissac's receptions, about the Duc de Nivernais and the Prince de Conti! Over yonder, everybody laughs when malice and slander turn to epigram. In these drawing-rooms some fifty fops are busy inventing witticisms which are thereupon hawked about all across Europe by loquacious poll-parrots whose fine feathers tarnish and droop by the way.

His accurate memory gives her a full account of the kind of talk the philosophers indulge in at Mme Geoffrin's, his benefactress. And now Catherine sees poets and writers, who have charmed away many a lonely hour for her, pass in review before her eyes, summoned by the rise and fall of his well-modulated and fancy-stimulating voice. " It was on a Monday evening, and they were all gathered around the arm-chair of my old friend in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, to listen to the talk. I was at her feet, seated on a little stool, as dumb as the proverbial oyster; she, dressed, as always, in a way that proclaimed her taste to be charming, even though strict, let her long sleeves of amethyst taffeta float down and touch the carpet. Keeping her needle plying all the while, she would draw out, with admirable skill, the brilliant flood of talk of M. d'Alembert, of Grimm or Diderot, flatter this

one, coax that one, pat her dog to make it cease its growling, ask the newly arrived guests to kindly keep quiet; or rouse other debaters to the controversy. At random, in her drawing-room, gems of epigram and ideas of solid worth were thrown off extempore; and these are the material that Diderot is now arranging in their proper order in the famous Encyclopedia. What feigned indignation in various quarters! What parry and thrust! many of the poor ladies ruin their health and waste their spare time at this fashionable pursuit!

"One of these Messieurs de l'Académie happens to die, let us say. It is then beyond all power of the imagination to picture the agitation of our good philosophers. Their lady-friends distribute the arm-chairs that as objects of envy are the fitting rivals of thrones. Merit, you ask? Who is speaking of merit? The man who is but the lion of the day is given the preference over the most astounding genius. Would you believe it if I were to tell you that M. de Voltaire has been twice refused admission to the Academy? And yet, look at the farce of it: they are making a proposal to place his statue there, and he alive! Mme Geoffrin burst out with this witty protest: 'What an affront to his predecessors and his contemporaries!'"

Catherine listens with the same pleasure

which in times gone by she had felt in discovering, in the serene peace of her days of hard study, the works which she took to her heart. For the first time in her life her physical being vibrates in unison with her intellect.

"Voltaire!" she exclaims, "I should have made him a pedestal with my own two hands! Dear Voltaire, he is my Master! I am his docile pupil. The author of 'The Spirit of Law' shares with him the homage and appreciation of our century. This latter book is my breviary, it ought to be in the pocket of every king who has any common sense."

"Madame, I cannot forget the freakish jibes of President de Montesquieu against the Polish aristocracy. Independence, oppression — what are these but chimerical expressions that vary in acceptation according to climate? Let us leave him, with his monomania of liberty; from this evening forth, Madame, I feel that I have lost mine."

Catherine affects not to understand him.

"What a spiteful holder of grudges you make yourself out to be! Was it not Montesquieu who fabricated the slanderous fiction that here in our Russia liberty wears a lousy beard? Well, in spite of this piece of impertinence, I feel an affection for him, for I have republican leanings. You laugh, you unbelieving young person, but you will not prevent

my preferring to worship at the shrine of Corneille rather than at that of the mealy-mouthed Racine whose cheap trumpery kings make me yawn. His women, brow-beaten, sanctimonious, and ready to swoon at the least provocation, make me grind my teeth; their snivellings and whimperings, put on for show, leave me absolutely cold."

His voice half-strangled with an emotion that is anything but feigned, Stanislaus interrupts her. He has slipped down and risen to his feet without her noticing. In a moment of magnificent boldness he has taken possession of her hand, so small yet so endowed with power to rule, and bringing his eyes to rest with cool effrontery on those orbs of hers that strive to master him, he says to her, slowly: " Deny Racine, Madame? you? how could that be possible for you who love all that is majestic and elegant? If Racine could have had but one look at your features, you would now be one of those princesses of his whom we learn by heart!"

This gallant bit of flattery sets her imagination ablaze. A tender hand-squeeze is the involuntary reply to his speech. The powdered wig bends down over Catherine's shoulder, a pair of bold lips seek their way through the bars of fabric to a throat which is past defending itself. Her cheek feels the

touch of a face aflame. Has the merry fellow got to this point under cover of the half-light? She eludes his kiss.

In this amorous contest wherein a heart and a will are opposed, which one is to carry off the honours? The badly smitten young débutant or the ambitious Grand-Duchess who is in love with Power, and whom circumstances are to force to blend her love-affairs with a strong tincture of politics?

Brusquely comes Leo Narushkin, who was always making his appearance most inopportunely, and breaks in upon the tender tête-à-tête. Above all love-sick dissertations he sets stick-the-cat and blind-man's buff. So our pair of lovers put an end to this dialogue in which caprice had by no means said its last word, and caring not a snap for time, romped and frolicked till dawn.

On the return home, the silence of the city and the deep slumber of the Palace buildings were Catherine's aiders and abettors. This escapade had taught her that boldness can always find a clear road. As she climbed the marble stair-way she threw prudence to the winds and started to hum a tune, to keep her courage up. And there stood her husband, on the topmost step, in his night-cap, his nose a fiery red, his eyes spread open wide like a fan.

"Whence come you, Madame?"

"I was looking for you, Monsieur, as is my duty."

"You were looking for me? Decidedly, your impertinence and your high-handed manners are not to be put up with. I shall find means to bring you to reason."

The Grand-Duchess, with supreme disdain in her tone asked him in what the arrogant conduct he complained of consisted. The Prince, put out of countenance, stammered something to the effect that she held her head too high.

"So then, in order to meet with your approval, I must go about with my back bent in a half-circle like the slaves of the Grand Signor?"

Peter turned white with anger.

"Oh! I shall find a way to bring you down off your high horse, never fear."

And he advanced towards her, pushed her against the wall, drew his sword and brandished it threateningly.

The Grand-Duchess did not move a muscle, but keeping her good-humour, remarked: "If it is a duel you are seeking, then I too need a sword."

The Grand-Duke replaced the weapon in its sheath, like a sulky child.

"It is shocking to see what a spiteful and cross-grained nature yours is."

And, his wine depriving him of his better sense, he started to hiccough, repeating, with a tipsy man's obstinate iteration: "I'll bring you down, I'll bring you down!"

V

LOVE-SICK POLITICS

THE winds have swept the snows away, and Spring comes bursting in with one mad rush. Spring, lord of many caprices, jostling winter at his pleasure, shakes the long-chilled Neva, framed in by its frost-bound docks. Loosed from its bonds the river crackles and crunches, sighs, opens up its widening rifts to the gush of the waters, and with hurrying tide it carries down, in this annual break-up, these moving mirrors of ice, to grind them with a crash against the pontoon-bridges.

The country-side stirs to life. In Lake Ladoga each huge block of ice, crowned with its weight of snow, slides adrift, forced to scud along by the eddying waters which race headlong towards the Gulf of Finland, hurtling away in their foam-fleck'd flight the last ice-floe which, in shape and grace of motion as in colour, might pass for some proud swan. Set free from their winter moorings the boats lift to the swell their shining hulks. The

drunken masts toss to and fro to the beat of the billows' rhythm.

Long held benumbed by the sharp white frosts and the nights of fog and haze, the Summer Garden wakens at a bound, the buds burst open with joy, the sap begins to run, a new light draws out the tiny spiral leaves, the grass pricks its green tongues up between the paving-stones of the Fontanka. Soon the lilacs, so sensitive to cold, and balsam-scented thyrsus will be leaning down over the green-swards. A love bird is singing, sweet herald of his kind. Stanislas Poniatowski rejects long fur-coat, galoshes and fur-cap, in order to feel the freshness of the springtime on his love-sick heart.

Opposite the gilded wicket he has brought his horse to a stop. Disguised as an *izvostchik,*[1] he settles down to wait. It is his first love-tryst. He is full of cheer and high spirits as he breathes in the joy-giving air that blows from the sea. Will she come? What intoxication to feel one's youth blend with the dawning day!

The Officer of the Guard comes up, his suspicions aroused, and prowls around the carriage. With a rough shake he awakens Stanislas, who is feigning sleep: "What are you doing here so close to the Palace? Who are you? Where is your master?"

[1] Coachman, cabby

Stanislas is in terror lest the Princess be caught and perhaps recognised. But he is a good actor, and plays his part so cleverly, muttering and going on like a half-witted creature, that the officer is softened by the stupidity of this pretended moujik, and takes himself off along the embankment, whistling contentedly.

He had lost all hope of the Grand-Duchess' appearing, when a young boy suddenly burst into view from out a syringa-clump. It was she. There she was, all in a quiver at her own boldness! "I made my escape in spite of my ladies-in-waiting and my servants," and, taking the hand that Stanislas stretched out to her, she springs lightly and nimbly into the covered buggy. The horse trots off. Our gallant, in an absent-minded mood, with one hand takes up the reins carelessly, while with the other he tenderly entwines the imperial and readily-yielding waist.

The vehicle is of the closed sort, and narrow, the road so rough that the jolts are kindly bringing the Princess to lean, again and again, upon his heart! Beneath the lap-rug, in an understanding that requires no words, their knees are already striking up an intimacy and rub one against the other coaxingly. He senses her body's delicious warmth invade his being like a tide. At this hour of day-break,

Catherine gives forth the odour as of a quail that has lost its way amid a patch of thyme. She trembles and shivers with voluptuous delight in his arms. Stanislas has ceased to see the floating mane, the turning wheel. At one *verst* from the city a cart has been left, through some oversight, on the road. The horse takes umbrage at it and shies suddenly. The carriage is upset and throws our pair of lovers headlong amongst the ruts.

Without so much as a sigh, the Grand-Duchess has fainted away on the muddy high-road. Seeing her so pale, more pale than a jasmin blossom, Stanislas imagines that the poor lady is dead.

" Catherine, Catherine," he cries in tearful distress, " before knowing the reality of my good fortune, why must I have lost it? "

He sobs as he kneels there on the damp ground. What suffering is his at the sight of those eyelids so fast-closed!

" Open your eyes, my well-beloved! "

Is her heart still beating beneath her satin dress? In what dream is she cruelly walled up, the while she so closely hugs the soil of Russia, like as a wife her husband? With loud cries Stanislas makes his wail; in his despair he strings words together without any sequence, like a tiny child. Catherine remains deaf to his appeal.

Then Stanislas, emboldened by the solitude of the surroundings, and tempted by the sweet face that offers itself to him defencelessly, places his lips upon her full-fleshed lips. O mystery of love! this first caress has brought Catherine wide awake. She opens her eyes and looks her astonishment.

" You love me, then? " she asks in a tone of coquetry and wheedling.

" Enough to shed tears, Madame! "

Preface of voluptuous ecstasy; anguish that precedes love's crowning; moment when the voraciously eager body is held tense by the impatient desire; wherein the spirit is captive to the flesh; golden hour comparable to a fully-ripened fruit!

By loving words Stanislas persuaded Catherine to allow him to take her to the home of his friend the English consul, Thomas Wroughton. This house, situated near the scene of their misadventure, was set off with rows of Dutch tulips, and had been placed at his disposal for the conduct of his love affair. Still somewhat dazed, obedient to the call of her destiny, she let herself be led along in silence.

Stanislas, on giving her his previously unsullied innocence of body, received in exchange her gluttonous passion. In this mutual interchange of ardent feeling he knew for the first

time that dizzy ladder of bliss up which one climbs at peril of losing one's balance. Whereupon he jealously guarded the impress of his mistress, and loved her with a devotion which was destined never to die out.

" I am so passionately in love," he confessed, " that I feel that a reverse in my affections would make me the unhappiest man in the world and would rob me of every whit of hope and courage."

Catherine initiates him in the mystery of love and reveals to him the meaning of poignant delight; Stanislas lays bare before her his sensitive soul, his weaknesses, the vacillating cast of his nature, and his fatalism.

She was now looking at her prey as he lay in a doze; her fingers kept travelling over him with a light exploring touch and with the sharp-edged surprise one feels at fondling the bales of unfamiliar textiles that a peddler takes from his pack. In the shadows cast by the curtains she followed the line of the rather protruding haunches and the voluptuous curve of the lyre-shaped abdomen. Would a first possessing of his charms keep its freshness of bloom and remain a treasured sentiment to which one grows no more accustomed than one does to the fact of death?

The novice who now came into Catherine's life gave himself up, unarmed, to a too clear-

make itself heard, a kiss exchanged evokes another mouth.

Surprised by the magnitude of his own bliss, Stanislas did not tax his ingenuity to make out the quality of his lady-love's delight. Had he been a practised seducer of women, had he had intimate converse with the fair sex instead of having wasted his time with the philosophers, he might perhaps have held Catherine's fancy, he might perhaps have kept his kingdom.

But Catherine was too young to take any fun out of the pastime of turning schoolmistress. The triumphant feats of prowess of the neophyte tended rather to estrange than to fix her fancy. She one evening confided to Yelaghin that she made it a habit to use men for as long as they were worth anything to her; after which, she would have liked to throw them into the fire, as one did with old furniture.

It was in the early summer of 1757. Look at the Grand-Duchess — her husband was right — she walks even more erect on her little feet, her eyes shine, her nose betrays her headstrong wilfulness. Is it love, or its carnal efflorescence, that gives her this well-kept balance, this self-confidence, and this astounding assurance? The courtiers are on the watch, and as they see

the physicians come and go, lancet in hand, in and out of the Empress' private apartments, they no longer hold aloof from paying their homage to Catherine, who on her part knows each one's weak point and takes full advantage of her knowledge. Attracted, in the first place, by her youthful charm, they end by bowing low before her audacity. The Lord Chancellor, Bestuzhieff, himself hesitates no longer; he is anxious to gain her favour and sends her a message by Stanislas.

" Who goes there? "

" It is the Grand-Duke's master-musician," replies the Pole as he passes the sentinel, wrapped in a Venetian cloak with long folds that sweep the ground, and his head buried beneath a flaxen wig. With noiseless tread, and the mien of one possessed, and carrying a violin under his arm, he climbs a hidden stairway, with the windings of which Narushkin had made him familiar. The stairs led directly to the secret boudoir which Catherine had devised as a place in which to receive her friends after her lying-in.

This little chamber, so shrouded in mystery, was made up of an easy-chair upholstered in orange-coloured velvet, a number of cheval-mirrors and folding-screens, and a few odd chairs; it was separated from the Grand-Duchess' bed by a large yellow curtain of fig-

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ured silk that, on being carefully drawn, had the effect of making the improvised den invisible to even the most suspecting eyes.

Stanislas entered stealthily, and threw his wig at the lap-dog; the latter fell to smelling it all over, yelping lustily the while. Catherine there lay resting in ravishing disarray. She had given birth to a daughter three weeks before. "God knows how my wife comes by her pregnancies!" the Grand-Duke had exclaimed when apprised of the happy delivery. "I do not know exactly whether this child is mine nor if it should remain at my charge." Stanislas felt great pride over its paternity, however.

How winsome was Catherine's beauty in its renewed grace, as she lay there with a transparent kerchief crossed beneath her breasts, her exquisitely shaped hands resting lightly on the snowy white lawn. He kissed them with courteous formality and then, without any transition — for he took delight in contrasts — rolled himself full length upon the pink-draperied bed. But he had forgotten the snappish little toy-spaniel and its intent eagerness to defend its mistress' chastity. Teeth bared, hair standing on end, it entered its protests against the fondlings of a rival. Catherine, her head thrown back amidst a billowing mass of lace, burst into screams of

laughter at the jealousy aroused in the dog by her mischievous lover who in the meanwhile kept playfully biting at the nape of her neck.

Thus taken up with one another, they pay no attention to the dog, so the beast proceeds to revenge himself on the weighty missive of Bestuzhieff, no less. The sheets of manuscript get loose from their wrappings, and the pampered puppy starts to chew them to pieces, scattering them all over the Persian carpet. With a single bound Stanislas leaps from off the bed, recovers the threatened sheets of fool'scap, deals out a few deftly-planted cuffs and slaps, and becoming serious all at once, hands Catherine the Chancellor's message.

It was a project designed to regulate the succession to the throne in Catherine's favour. Bestuzhieff will direct her course and will share the power, in case of need, with her. There is no need to fear if she accepts; he will get the document signed by the Empress with the utmost precaution, slipping it in amongst other papers of no importance. Between two lovers and two prayers Elizabeth will put her imperial sign-manual to it, so giddy-headed is she. The trick will be turned. The Grand-Duchess is flattered that the Chancellor is from henceforward to reckon with her. But, either from prudence or through clever perspicacity, she asks for various corrections and alterations

in the drafting, and insists on having time to think the matter over.

Between Catherine, Bestuzhieff, Williams and Poniatowski, the understanding now becomes closer. A secret binds them together. Our four co-partners complot, converse in secret, and conspire. War is to bring them still more closely together before parting them asunder.

Russia was then preparing a campaign against the King of Prussia. The war of the three petticoats, as the anti-feminist Frederick called it; and he set his Pomeranians to whirl in their strenuous drill round and round on the cobble-stones of Potsdam.

At St. Petersburg the French party triumphs, under the leadership of the Empress' lover, the vice-chancellor Shuvaloff. Catherine conceals her dissatisfaction beneath a well-affected hypocrisy. Peter, in desperation, has but one hope: that of being soundly drubbed by his friends the Prussians. Faced with the collapse of all his plans, Williams plucks handfuls of hair from his ancient wig. Bestuzhieff sits on the fence. His own leanings are towards Austria, but his foresighted prudence shows him the favourite, Shuvaloff, watching for an opportunity to take his place. Poniatowski is alarmed at the prospect of Poland's becoming the bleeding stake of all this

loosened welter of rival ambitions: whether battles be won or lost, his poor fatherland will be trodden under foot.

Our group of discomfited plotters meets clandestinely in Catherine's boudoir, while under the Palace-windows the crowd shouts: "To Berlin! to Berlin!" The regiments called to the colours execute a march past beneath the July sun. Were they on their way to victory or to defeat? Here are Scythians who let fly their arrows as they run at full speed in a sort of rhythmic dance the goal of which is death; there go Cossacks from the Don perched on their mettlesome horses, lance in hand, shouting the loud wild war-cries with which they rouse themselves to a drunken frenzy. There go the hussars of Wallachia, here comes the infantry, and after them the artillery with its monstrous great-guns called 'unicorns,' and capable — can you believe it? — of firing nine shots per minute. Then follow five hundred horses lugging the baggage-train of Marshal Apraxin, his Asiatic tent, red and green, with a lining of cloth-of-gold, a trophy snatched from the Great Mogul, and his silver plate hidden away in the ammunition waggons that are stamped with his coat-of-arms. What a tremendous uproar on the city streets!

The soldiers as they march along blend all the various types of music one with another;

strident laments of the Scythians, songs of the nomad tribes, military marches, the melancholy airs of the river-folk, the home-sick longings of the hamlet-dwellers. Stanislas counted seventy-two thousand men.

In a state of exaltation at the brave sight of all this warlike and proud-stepping young manhood, this pomp and pride of war, Catherine puts a question to herself which she is unable to answer off-hand: wherein lies Russia's better part, in war, or in peace? She is busy with these thoughts, when her gentleman-usher announces that Marshal Apraxin has come to pay his respects to Her Imperial Highness.

"Kindly leave me, Gentlemen; admit the Marshal."

He comes in, grave, weighty in his bearing. He is a needy sort of fellow, to whom cheating at play is an old story. He lives in great style and his fondness for luxury goes the length of smothering his clothes with diamonds. He would stop short of no kind of treasonable conduct that would increase his credit at Court. Such was the man to whom the Empress entrusted the honour of her army.

"I am starting very shortly, to place myself at the head of our soldiers," said he, "and I did not wish to leave St. Petersburg without saying good-bye to Your Imperial Highness. Since

Her Majesty is still indisposed, I have come, Madame, to take my instructions from you."

On the table a map lay spread out, with tiny Prussia in forget-me-not blue, Poland in pink, and Russia a golden yellow like its vast wheat-fields. Catherine bent over a frontier-fort marked in red.

"Sir Marshal, they claim that Frederick is waiting for you at Memel with his Pomeranian troops drawn up in battle-array."

"Pshaw! what do we want with a paltry little clump of mud-huts like that? I am more in favour of advancing through Poland towards Silesia."

"Perhaps the King of Prussia will fall on your flank during your march?"

"In that case, Madame, I shall defend myself, but I have no intention of attacking the Prussians in the open field."

"It is a pleasure to converse with you, Lord Marshal, I see that we understand one another to perfection. If you are in doubt at any time, write to me. God keep you."

Then rising with her most majestic and seductive air, her eyes fixed on the map of Europe, she dismissed him.

She was tired, uneasy; a secret presentiment warned her that the game she was playing was a dangerous one. Turned political plotter, Catherine hovered uncertainly between the

perils that lurked about her every step, and the glory that success might bring. Her swing-seat, propelled by Poniatowski, was no more than grazing the earth, without as yet reaching the heights. They ratified their partnership in imprudence with lovers' kisses, and played at hide-and-seek with their handsome heads as the stake.

Had she been right in hearkening to the Englishman's counsel? The head-steward notified her that dinner was served. She was on her way to sit down at table when Sir Charles Williams entered without his usual haughty arrogance of manner, and stammering with rage: " Madame, I wish to apprise you of the affront direct I have just received from her Majesty the Empress. We were in the White Room-of-State; I was just about to go to greet her when she strode over to me. 'My Lord Ambassador of England, does London desire to have the whole of Europe its enemy? Your privateers have shown disrespect to my flag. Prince Galitzin, my minister at the court of King George, has demanded satisfaction. They have been deaf to my representations. Consequently I forbid any of my ministers to have any relations with you, and I order you to leave St. Petersburg within a week. And let me add further: you will have no second opportunity for leave-taking.' "

" My friend, my only friend," cried Catherine, stretching out both her hands to him, while he covered them with a rain of tears, " alas! what is to become of me? you are leaving me. Never shall I forget how much I am obligated to you. In order to reward you, I promise to seize every opportunity to bring Russia back to her true interests, that is to say, to a close alliance with England: Russia must by every assistance in her power assure to England that superiority the latter ought to have, for the good of Europe as a whole, over France, their common enemy, whose greatness is a disgrace to Russia! I shall make it my chief study to put these sentiments into practice. They are the base on which I desire to found and build my claim to renown. You it was who pointed me out the road. I shall remember it always. Good-bye, my lord. Someone is coming. If the Empress were to enter now, I should pay dearly for your friendship."

One month after Sir Charles' precipitate departure, a courier brought to the Court the news that Marshal Apraxin had carried off the victory of Gross Jaegersdorf from the Prussians. Such a swift conquest! The Prussians routed, — O surprise beyond hope! Catherine immediately determined to celebrate this exploit at her Oranienbaum retreat with all the pomp and brilliancy imaginable. The

more uneasy she felt, the less she wished to have it appear.

All engrossed with the preparations for the festivities, she was making her way along the garden-walk, her arms weighted with a load of roses and laurel-wreaths. "There goes a woman for whose sake an honest man could find it in his heart to endure a few lashes with the knout with pleasure, don't you think, my dear Count?" said General Lieven to Poniatowski. This latter considered his mistress his chiefest treasure. "She would make me forget everything in the way of prudence, and even Siberia itself," thought he as he drank in with his every breath the sight of the youthful face more pink than summer's blooms.

Catherine was everywhere at once, ringing the bells, singing the *Te Deum*, decorating the house with floral trophies; and followed everywhere by Lamberti, her gardener, a strange old oddity who used to shake his pruning-shears or his basket, as the case might be, at his interlocutor, while he predicted, in his nasal sing-song voice, that soon his mistress, carried off by a flight of eagles, would become the greatest sovereign that All the Russias ever had. "Do not smile, little Highness, I saw it, one night, in your star that kept shooting, shooting along as it climbed up and up the sky."

The Grand-Duke was keeping aloof, his hopes all sunk to earth. Had he not believed the Prussians invincible? He could not dissemble his annoyance. "Strange attitude for an heir!" murmured the officials of his household as they called each other's attention to the vexation plainly marked on his face.

The guests came in flocks from Cronstadt and from St. Petersburg, some by boat, others by carriage; the former climbing up the steep gradients and the successive tiers of the terraced park, the latter turning in a circle in front of the marble door-steps, quite thrown into confusion when it came their turn to make a low bow before Their Highnesses.

Before supper was served, pretty page-boys, carrying gilded vessels, distributed amongst the guests, with bright smiles, the little notes they called 'Valentines.' These were then used as lottery-tickets to draw for places at the tables, without regard to the laws of etiquette. Chance accorded to Count Poniatowski a seat on the right of the Grand-Duchess; M. de la Messelière, an attaché of the French embassy, gained a place at her left. At the next table there were Counts Potocki, Branitcki, the handsome Rzewuski, a Sapieha; all of them young people of most engaging beauty of feature. Turning 'round so as to face them,

Catherine said to them in a low voice, as she pointed to Stanislas: " Gentlemen, one of these days I shall give him to you as your King." This sounded at the time like empty talk, and passed as a mere jest.

Suddenly the garden burst into a blaze of light. A slowly moving waggon, drawn by oxen wearing garlands of leaves on their heads, and accompanied by laughing female bacchanals, made its appearance where the shingled walk wound into view. Italian singers with their sun-steeped voices sang to the accompaniment of Araga's music airs so affecting that the gentlemen were forced to attest the depth of their emotions by falling each on his fair neighbour's lovely round neck.

The Princess begged M. de la Messelière, an excellent performer on the flute, to play some of Rameau's compositions. Catherine was not much of a musician. She had a poor ear and hummed quite out of tune; but Poniatowski had a great fondness and appreciation for the cadences of a master. His red heels kept perfect time with the most affected and complicated gavotte. The society of that epoch was losing its taste for Lulli and cultivating an infatuation for the newer music. " At the rate at which the musical art is going ahead," Diderot was wont to say, " I have no idea where it will end up." Rameau, the Stra-

vinsky of those days, could not fail to win applause in a country which was beginning to take to the art of the ballet with marked enthusiasm.

" Ladies and Gentlemen," — the old gardener, dressed up as a travelling mountebank, a tall sugar-loaf hat on his head, now started to make his clap-trap speech: " Come, Ladies, come, good Sirs, at every throw you are a winner, I am the vendor of happiness. Enter, it is free of charge." Lords, chamberlains and ladies and maids-of-honour rushed pell-mell upon the turnstiles and snatched away flowers, sword-knots, porcelain-pieces, fans. Catherine was set on winning adherents by her profusion of gifts. During the hubbub the Grand-Duke, drunk with Tokay, slipped quietly off and lost himself in the park-woods along with his favourite mistress, Elizabeth Worontsoff.

Scarcely had the lamps been put out and the lackeys gone to their beds, when news was brought — O stupefying tidings! — that the hero of yesterday's triumph, instead of following up his victory, was scurrying off the field, burning his supplies like a veritable madman, and spiking his cannon while his astounded troops looked on and wept! The portly Marshal Apraxin put an incredible amount of vim into this desperate flight of his; it was as

though he were possessed of a devil. Nobody could make rhyme or reason out of it. Catherine, alas, was only too conversant with what lay behind it. What inconsistency, what a series of imprudent moves, what sheer madness! Had she been made the sport of all these new acquaintances of hers? In this maze of plotting and counter-plotting had her mind perhaps lost its bearings?

At all costs she must have speech with Stanislas before the morrow broke. No one is at hand to whom she can entrust a note. Ah, yes, here is her hairdresser waiting to undo her curls. She scribbled these words: "Dearest, come and meet me without delay in the little wooden summer-house. I shall be waiting for you there till morning." In her calculations, though, she had forgotten her husband's mistress, whose image suddenly rose before her.

Peter and his light-o'-love were strolling in the woods of Oranienbaum, and reeling as they walked: they were properly fuddled. Without respect to his rank, the trees collided violently with His Imperial Highness, the branches executed the order 'present arms,' the earth rocked and see-sawed; Peter passed the time in calling the moon vile names, and swearing at her for a beggarly slattern that

refused to come out of her blue peep-hole. In his zig-zag course he bumped into a passer-by on whom his husky voice rained a hail of oaths: "Who is this clumsy clod-hopper?" — "The court-tailor," replied Stanislas, who changed his trade with each new tryst. Elizabeth, who was less in her cups, had no difficulty in recognising him beneath his disguise, and made up her mind to re-awaken the Grand-Duke's burnt-out jealousy.

The moment Stanislas put his foot inside the summer-house he was set upon by three men who had been placed in ambush, grabbed by the collar and brutally dragged in the direction of the sea, the rippling and splashing of which could be distinctly heard. The unhappy Polish gentleman, without any zest in the devotional exercise, commended his soul to God. At the water's edge, turning about suddenly, the soldiers of the household guard pushed him into a tiny cottage hidden away among the firs. Then the Grand-Duke walks up to him:

"Have you had your way with my wife?"

"My Lord, you cannot think of such a thing."

"Tell me the truth! If you speak frankly, everything may yet be settled satisfactorily."

"But indeed I can not, merely to humour Your Imperial Highness' whim, tell you that I have done what I have not done."

— "Since you remain obstinate, you shall stay here in prison until further orders."

For the space of two hours Stanislas was sunk in meditation, delivered to the sway of his thoughts. The Grand Inquisitor of the Privy Chancellery came to interrogate him: "I think that you will understand, Sir," declared the prisoner, "that it is a matter quite as vital to the honour of your Court as it is to myself that this comedy should be brought to an end with the least possible amount of stir, and that you release me from this place as soon as ever you can."

And as day was dawning, Stanislas was taken back to St. Petersburg in a glass-enclosed carriage. He was awaiting his fate with no degree of patience, when the Grand-Duchess found means to slip him a note by stealth, in which she begged him to make advances to her husband's mistress. The next evening, on getting an invitation to the Court-ball, Stanislas lost no time in asking Elizabeth Worontsoff to dance, and with a bow he whispered to her: "It is in your power to make certain people happy."

"That is already as good as done; come to the summer-house at Montplaisir. Their Highnesses are spending the night there, and there you will find me."

Stanislas was ushered into the smoke-

wreathed apartment of the Grand-Duke. The latter came and greeted him smilingly, his pipe between his teeth: "You were a big fool not to have taken me into your confidence. Had you done so, all this silly squabble would have been avoided."

Stanislas agreed with everything the other wished him to, and, in order to win him over, flattered the maniac on his military genius. The words of praise soon put him in excellent humour.

"Now that we are good friends again, there is still some one missing from our party," and going into his wife's room he dragged her from her bed without giving her time to put on her stockings, and brought her bare-foot into Stanislas' presence. "Well now! there he is! I hope that you are both pleased with me."

Peter played no end of roguish tricks. Elizabeth kept true to her part of coquette; Catherine was reserved. At last the Grand-Duke rose: "Good-night, my children! I fancy you have no need of my services," and he made a dignified exit, accompanied by his mistress.

Yielding to this conjugal invitation, Catherine attempted a caress, but her hand stopped half-way in the motion, as though paralysed. Frozen with fear, distraught, her eyes rivetted to the door, she stood at attention to catch any

noise that might spell hidden danger. In the air about them floated a host of menaces they could not see. Whose was to be the cruel hand that should draw these vague threats to a focus?

VI

CLOISTER OR BED-RECESS

WHAT would one not do for a ribbon, lovely red ribbon bordered with yellow piping, and over the surface of which straggled a cross of the purplish hue of the egg-plant? Peter had promised the order of St. Ann to Leo Narushkin, on the stated condition that he would consent to spy upon Catherine and Stanislas and report their conversations to him. A man absurdly vain remains ever absurdly vain, particularly when he happens to be a courtier. To change masters is an easy matter: ingratitude is everywhere to be found, even at Court.

Leo Narushkin, seduced by the bit of watered ribbon, enters upon his new rôle with hearty co-operation. What do you think of such a traitor, who could renounce his friend Stanislas, and wheedle Elizabeth Worontsoff, to the detriment of his benefactress? The latter, incensed by this disloyal conduct, kept on the lookout for a chance to shew him, by some galling and memorable lesson, the reverse side of vanity's medal.

An inspiration from heaven directed her steps towards her Chinese boudoir. There she found the cheeky rascal sprawled on her sofa, quite as though he were at home, his legs in the air, his head buried among the cushions, and humming a smutty song. As the blackguard seemed totally unaware of her presence, Catherine, provoked beyond endurance by this piece of insolence, signalled to Tatiana Zhuvievna to come quietly on the scene. This Tatiana was a jovial buxom servant, a regular child-spanker matron, powerful and heavy-handed. And on they came, closing in on the merry singer, two nettle-stalks hidden behind their petticoats. Leo, our champion joker, was now singing away at the top of his bent. What a glorious farce! Tatiana held him down and removed his trousers. Bursting with laughter the while, and deaf to all his excuses and confessions, she pinned him down on the sofa in spite of his wriggling. Then, keeping rhythmic timing to their strokes, they administered to him, with a 'you-begged-for-it-now-you've-got-it,' a lively drubbing that gave him a courteous spine and the manners of a *grand seigneur*.

His . . . figure swollen, he had to keep to his room for three days. . . . He left it to celebrate his coming marriage with Mlle Zakrefsky, and boasted to nobody of the jest. Cath-

erine was not one to hold spite. Leo was not of a vindictive nature either: in memory of this corrective lesson, she later on appointed him Master of the Horse, and, as it goes in the story-books, he grew old alongside of her in the same Palace, a witness of all her conduct, yet one who embarrassed her but little; and he held the stirrup for his faithful mistress as she straddled across history from mount to mount.

On the morning of the marriage, she was seated in front of her dressing-table taking off her curl-papers, when Leo, on his way past, threw a sealed note to her and fled on. He was hastening to present his head to the wig-maker's attentions. The whole Palace was topsy-turvy, the maids of honour were stirred to a fever-heat by the task of hunting up all the Imperial diamonds they could lay their hands on, for the purpose of using them to deck out, as the custom was, the witty, the notoriously gay Maria Worontsoff, the promised bride of Count Buturlin, and the beautiful Zakrefsky, Leo's betrothed.

Mlle Schmidt, the shepherdess of this virginal flock, was quite at her wits' end; she was continually reprimanding them for their brazen-faced boldness, and for letting this double wedding-party upset them so completely. At night, if a page on some frolicsome errand

bent, wanted to make his way to the room of the maidens, he had to pass beneath the vigilant eye of the old girl, who was as much of an epicure as a cat, and to whom they all had to pay toll in various trifles, sweetmeats and tit-bits.

Catherine broke the seal on the envelope: "I make use of this means to warn you that Count Bestuzhieff has been arrested and shorn of all his offices and dignities." The note was unsigned. Seized with terror though she was, Catherine recognised Poniatowski's writing. What anguish! what a tragedy! . . . What was she to do? She read and re-read the stupefying news. A cold sweat moistened her temples; she almost fell 'from her high horse,' but this was no time for fainting. Dissemble, and then again dissemble; always; she tried a smile; the reflection in the mirror showed her pale and wan. "Hand me the pot of rouge." And painting her cheek-bones a purplish red, with a dagger stabbing at her heart she put on, as a sleep-walker might, the magnificent dress of Tours velvet set off with silver lace; this had been laid out by her waiting-women for her to attend the marriage of the maids-of-honour.

At the church, Princes, Chamberlains, Lords and Ladies looked at one another with anxiety visible in each eye; nobody gave any heed to the ceremony; the songs of gladness had a

false ring; the brides let the wax from their tapers fall drop by drop upon their embroidered gowns. Never was the wedding of the sorriest clown more sad and gloomy; and yet, for the past week, the betting-odds had been given and taken between Count Osten and Hetman Razumowski as to which of the two newly-wed husbands would be the first to be branded cuckold.

During the wedding-ceremony the Grand-Duchess drew near to Prince Trubetskoï, chief commissioner of the investigation, and under pretext of looking at his decorations, said to him in a low voice: "Have you come across more crimes than criminals, or more criminals that crimes? Is it true that Marshal Apraxin, on his return from the army, at the very first examination let an apoplexy carry him off?"

"Yes, Madame, and there is even some talk of a poisoned snuff box that is making its rounds."

Catherine shivered.

As for the Chancellor, stories were told, in whispers, of his courage. Arrested during a Council-meeting, he had exclaimed: "Let the Empress' will be done!," while the grenadiers took his sword from him by force and bundled him into a carriage! Brought back to his own home, he had been searched thoroughly, undressed, and left naked in the midst of his

sealed papers. Bestuzhieff broke into a sneer that was like the laughter of the inferno! What a farce to inflict on this the first personage of the Empire! "I am cold, I am all of a shiver. Where is Doctor Boerhaave? Send him in to feel my feverish pulse." Then, on the sly, he slipped him a note which he had had the fore-sighted care to write to calm the Grand-Duchess' fears: "You have nothing to dread, madame, everything is burnt."

Even though Catherine was bold and boasted herself the least fearful of women, the events of the past few days exceeded the limits of her audacity. Had the flames truly destroyed that cursed manifesto concocted by Bestuzhieff to place her in the position of sovereign power? She was but too familiar with a Russian's characteristic carelessness. In spite of the Chancellor's own word, she was in doubt concerning the matter, and begged Stanislas to make certain of it.

And here we have our Polish gentleman engaged in a continued correspondence with a prisoner of state! What a nerve-racking uncertainty! What mortal terrors! Catherine lost all ability to sleep. Each day brought her some new anguish; she was hemmed and walled in with nightmares. Alas! she had good cause to tremble! One morning her valet-de-chambre arrived stammering and stutter-

ing: Stanislas had been betrayed, his letters were in the hands of the police.

Immediately the Vice-Chancellor demanded that the conspirator be summoned before him. Stanislas is to go into exile without a leave-taking, without a single caress to his proud lady, without even turning back to look at her.

They will not have the right to correspond with each another.

At this news, Catherine flies into a passion of rebellion and walks up and down her room to ease her heart's tumult. In a burst of sobbing she throws herself on her bed and turning towards the wall she lets fall one by one a flood of tears which she smothers upon her painted cheeks. Happiness is not like sensual pleasure, it has but a single face. Threatened with the loss of this happiness, she now found in her heart a jealous warmth of affection for Stanislas; she no longer saw his wavering character nor his theatrical vanity; she forgot his indecision and his torturing doubts, and no longer dwelt on anything else but the licentious verses he was wont to declaim to her as he shared her pillow and treated her to his cajoleries. Soon, her anger gaining the upper hand over her grief, she dried her tears, stormed and swore, and made up her mind that she would take her revenge on all these be-wigged diplomatists.

Catherine was uncertain what token of regard she should give her lover. Characteristically prudent, she finished by contenting herself with a certificate, after her own manner, addressed to Stanislas' father: "Charles XII honoured your merit with marks of his royal favour; I shall find means, one day, to honour that of your son, and to raise him perhaps above Charles XII himself." Language of an Empress sure of herself; and yet, at this very moment, the shadow of her own downfall lay heavy upon her!

Kept apart from the main current of Court life, she is now more friendless than ever. Her partisans withdraw their allegiance. A sister of her husband's mistress is the only one to befriend her; and this woman evinces a devoted affection for her that engrosses every other emotion. The Grand-Duchess dominates this little creature; she exerts a fascination over the future Princess Daschkoff; she sends her every evening to the house of her sister Elizabeth to bring her a report of the mischief that is being plotted: "I caught the word 'exile,' then they fell silent. The Grand-Duke is afraid of me, while as for me, I am not afraid of him. I heard aright and no mistake; yes, Madame, they were not afraid to say that they would shut you up in a cloister for the rest of your days."

Shorn, like Peter the Great's first wife! Catherine passed her hand lovingly over her hair that was braided in two thick plaits around her forehead in the Moscow style, and which, when undone, fell to her ankles. Her high spirits would be beating themselves to pieces against imprisoning bars, her ambition was to be doomed to stifle in a tightly-shut cell, instead of opening its buds to the sky in the setting of a boundless empire! A Mother Superior in the stead of Ministers, a class of unteachable junior nuns in place of a row of obliging lovers! What a sorry jest! To her ambitious imagination, this kingdom of the iron railing would be restricted indeed, and a much too modest veil for her covetous desires. " Renounce the will to rule over an empire? Never! I am resolved to reign or perish! " Who talks of renunciation? As for this political conspiracy hatched by a handful of topers, she would upset it and its calculations.

At an age when tears were the sovereign remedy to dissipate the clouds of ill-feeling and spite, she had borne everything without a tear, frauds, betrayals, humiliations. It is true that at that time Peter was in the habit of coming to seek her aid, calling her his " Madame Resourcefulness," and taking full advantage of her sound advice, without so much as a ' thank you.' Since, however, she was greedy for

nothing else than power, gratitude was of slight value to her. But now that a league of old soldiers and flatterers had taken it into their heads to lay her on the shelf, it was time to act.

Women are timid creatures up to the time when they start to compare themselves one with the other. This young German Princess who had arrived in the vast territory of Russia with no other fortune than her slate-grey eyes that changed hue like the roofs of her little city, a pink complexion and an eligible degree of bodily attractiveness, had learnt to her own satisfaction that her lord, poor puppet as she knew him to be, was not her master. Then why share the hazardous fortunes of this capricious imbecile whose whimsies would hurry the ship of state to land on the rocks? He used to say: "I was not born to serve Russians, I do not suit them. I am convinced, besides, that I shall meet my death in this beastly country." Catherine was wont to laugh at these superstitious utterances, but she took pleasure in hearing them repeated, the while she became further and further estranged from such a disagreeable and peevish husband. Between them there hovered an ever-latent hostility.

In order to win back the Empress' favour, she went so far as to feign a heart attack, and took to her bed. A physician came hurrying to her bedside, but she sent him away with

scant politeness, and to the tune of deep groans asked for Her Majesty's confessor.

And now the Grand-Duke is radiant, already anticipating his being left a widower. He had promised Elizabeth Worontsoff that he would marry her, and later on raise her to the throne. This olive-hued mistress, forever swearing and spitting, was already doing the honours of a lawful wife at their private apartments.

The Pope,[1] however, softened by the piety of his farcical penitent, confided to the Empress how touching was the case of her niece: she, so gentle and sweet, to be so outraged by a husband who snapped his fingers at such virtue beneath his own roof. The Empress owed her protection to this unhappy woman whom God had given into her keeping. The bewitching beauty of the Grand-Duchess had gotten the better of the pious old man; he had let himself be carried away by that persuasive eloquence that always ended by overpowering confessor, lover, or husband. Catherine bothered herself but little about the means she used. Men, hypnotised by her will, became in her hands submissive instruments.

At the urgent request of the priest, the Sovereign had her niece summoned before her. Catherine threw herself impetuously on her knees and with tears streaming down her face

[1] Title of priest of the Greek Orthodox Church.

begged the Empress to send her home to her mother. Behind a screen, the Grand-Duke and the Shuvaloffs kept whispering.

"God is my witness how much I have loved you, child," said the Empress, "but I am tired of your proud spirit: you seem to think that there is no one that is smarter than yourself."

The Grand-Duke came out of his lurking-place and cried: "The viper! she is terribly wicked and cunning, and extremely headstrong!"

The Empress, in her severe manner, addresses Catherine:

"You meddle with many things that do not concern you. How dared you send orders to Marshal Apraxin?"

The Grand-Duchess replied, like the hypocrite she was, that never had such an idea entered her head.

"The letters are there, nevertheless, in that bowl; can you deny having written them?"

Catherine had no difficulty in recognising her notes, folded as they lay amid powder-puffs and cosmetics of all sorts. She affirmed that those letters but proved her innocence.

"Since you have read them, Madame, you are well aware that they contain nothing but a few complimentary phrases."

Her Majesty, threateningly: "Bestuzhieff

declares that there was a regular continued correspondence between you and the Marshal."

"If Bestuzhieff says that, he lies."

Then, to strike terror to her, the Empress whispered in her ear: "Well then, since he is lying, I shall have him put to the torture."

The Grand-Duchess, without losing countenance, though a little pale: "Your Majesty is mistress and can do whatever she will judge fitting."

"Leave our presence, Madame, until further orders. Try to make yourself worthy of the pardon which I intend to grant. And do not forget that you ought to consider yourself very fortunate in having to deal with a Sovereign who has no acquaintance with fear."

After this interview the Empress confided to her intimate friends that the Grand-Duchess was a lover of truth and justice; she declared, moreover, that she, the Empress, would not stand idly by and see such a woman doom herself to exile. The Vice-Chancellor, the then reigning favourite of Her Majesty, was asked to use all the seductive arts at his command to prevail upon Catherine to give up her idea of leaving. He employed them to such good purpose that he pursued the Grand-Duchess with his declarations of love and devotion under the very eyes of the jealous Empress, who was too ill to defend her own

heart's peace. The favourite made no attempt to hide this cruel game; he quite aspired to the double office. In this way he would be having a footing in each of the two Courts. But Catherine was not troubling her head about him. She had already made her choice.

VII

INTERREGNUM

ST. PETERSBURG has always taken delight in scandal. Alternated with slander, it provides distraction for the court parasites. At about this time a certain spicy and captivating Princess Kurakin, a frivolous beauty with a pair of laughing eyes, was taken by surprise by her lover, General Shuvaloff, in one of those moments of careless unrestraint which leaves but little doubt in the mind of the most short-sighted person. She was indulging in a wanton frisk with Orloff, the General's quarrelsome aide-de-camp. The General, chief-in-command of the artillery, nonplussed by such an unexpected piece of familiarity, flew into a rage in his most magnificent manner, and called his servants and ordered them to give the brazen scoundrel a sound drubbing. Orloff made short work of beating them off with a few well-planted blows and sundry boxes on the ear; all the lackeys were served in the same way—rumour claiming that they were a hundred strong. Counting their bumps and bruises, and rubbing their nether parts, they

made off in limping discomfiture, leaving the two principals face to face and the Lady Kurakin still lying provocatively on the sofa, pulling back about her pretty legs the cape that had slipped off her during the fray.

Shuvaloff, trusting to the prestige of the military hierarchy, made the imprudent move of offering the faithless fair her choice. The skittish princess gave her preference to beauty; and thus came renown to cling to the name of Gregor Orloff, victor in this chamber-duel, who suddenly became, thanks to the rank and fame of his partner in the episode, the lieutenant in fashion.

No sooner had Catherine been apprised of this scandalous affair than she laid her plans for action. Knowing that one might safely take Princess Kurakin's lovers with one's eyes shut, and feeling an appreciative interest in adventurers far more than in the mere adventures, she resolved to get more closely acquainted with this hero who was so like a madman in his recklessness, so famous a gamester, so deeply sunk in debts, and who, the gossips claimed, was forever lying between two beds or else seated between two bottles. The blond fighter would provide her a welcome change from the sombre Pole whose morbid subtlety the unwholesome influence of Williams had still further intensified.

Since Orloff's lodgings were on the square right opposite the Palace windows, she was able to secretly keep track of his blustering and roystering exits, or else she looked on while the pretty Kurakin joined him, hidden beneath a long cloak. Her desire, spurred on by jealous curiosity, kept her eyes continually roaming in the direction of the closed shutters. Her nerves suffering under the strain, she finally made a confidential disclosure of the situation to one of her waiting-women, and this latter immediately found the remedy: " If you swear, madame, not to betray your identity, I shall bring him to you."

The intriguing maid ran down the stairway at breakneck speed, met Orloff just as he was re-entering his quarters somewhat befuddled with liquor, and with her face wreathed in smiles brushed against him in the passage. He stopped, addressed some jocular and flattering remarks to her, kissed her, and in an absent-minded sort of way plunged a pilfering hand into the gap of her bodice. Blushing furiously, she re-adjusted her mussed ribbons and invited him to follow her to the abode of her mistress, a very genteel lady, as beautiful as she was attractive and desirable, and badly smitten with him, but anxious to keep her incognito.

" Allow me to blindfold these fine eyes of

yours with this kerchief I have ready, and you will not have any grounds for regretting your boldness, I swear it on my maidenhood!"

Orloff, amused by the young woman's banter, willingly consented to all her proposals. She bundled him into a cab, took her seat beside him, and in order the better to put him off the track, had the horses driven at a gallop several times around the Palace.

At last they came to a stop. The gallant, roused to high spirits with anticipation and curiosity, but retaining his promised tractability, let himself be led to the unknown alcove. Catherine, to beguile her impatience, had removed her attire. Orloff snatched off the bandage. She was stark naked. The artilleryman, who never wasted any time in tomfoolery, without further ceremony set up his batteries in the fair charmer's bed. It was no time for bowing-and-scraping and courteous palaver. To whet his appetite to the full he took every imaginable liberty. What's the use of talking twaddle, — life is so short. This fine buxom wench was too fond of babbling; he stopped up her mouth with his hand, and the duet went on in accordance with the fervour of their desires. The gluttonousness of Orloff was insatiable, and the night passed in feats of prowess, in somersaultings and boastful tales of high romance. Catherine made no

complaint, her scruples were transitory, she was a stranger to remorse.

Having been deceived again and again, without truce or pause, she no longer believed in constancy. Doubtless it was true, that in order to hide her fantastic behaviour from the attentive scrutiny of Europe, it was imperative that she should play the part of heart-broken lady-love left to mourn. At that period sentimentality was very much the fashion. What tears were shed! In order to dissemble the natural reaction of cynicism it became the vogue to weep in music; the turtle-doves pecked and billed one another while they burst with sighs. Greuze gathered these tears and placed them on the same pallid cheeks on which Boucher stuck velvet beauty-patches and wet all his canvasses with their brine.

While Stanislas is giving his sighs an airing in the parks of Warsaw, Catherine shamelessly parades her grief and distress and acts the part of a disconsolate lady-love; and yet she is the least tinged with romanticism of all the women of the century. She is ardently in love with love, but the effects of a real passion remain outside her experience. In the adventures of the heart, she does not pine and waste away, she does not burn to a cinder; her torch goes out, and some passerby relights it. Let a lover forsake her, and she groans but for a

few moments and that only in her flesh, and not in her heart. The vocabulary that accompanies the tender intimacies of her time is not a familiar language to her. In spite of appearances, she is a sensible and rational woman, a century behind her times. Love has its styles, the same as art. She might have made a fitting mate for Henri IV, her favourite hero, who was fully versed, like herself, in the hospitality of loosely-tucked sheets behind the alcove-hangings.

'My lover?' . . . she kept repeating this word with the tone of voice of a débutante; indestructible word that, like the phœnix, springs to new birth from its ashes; Orloff, however, was no poet; he had taken his leave of her without asking any questions, so little affected by curiosity except in the matter of pleasure. Catherine was quite satisfied with her nocturnal visitor. How bruised and battered she was! What muscles the fellow had! Decidedly, Princess Kurakin had taste! She felt herself under the sway of this pink Hercules with the head of an angel. Of his family she knew merely that there were four brothers of them, all four soldiers, Feodor, Alexis the Scarred, little Theodor, and lastly Gregor. Thinking that she was ignorant even of his middle name, she fell asleep.

And while Pleasure was being brought to

the Palace on special invitation, Death was furtively intruding itself at the bedstead of the Empress and was numbering her last days.

✣

At the season of the Epiphany, in 1762, the sky was black, the earth was white, and the Empress, embalmed, lay horizontally between that sky and that earth, crushed down under a weight of velvet and silver. Beneath the glass coffin-lid her eyes, composed in their last sleep, no longer saw the low clouds that hung over her bier. Gently rocked upon the great springs of the hearse with its rich housings, and drawn by twelve proudly caparisoned horses led by Cossacks, Elizabeth Petrowna passed to her resting-place. Her own regiment led the procession. Her grenadiers, bearing torches, had put on their mourning great-coats.

Wearing each a purple cape, the choir of singers preceded the funeral chariot, from the tiny toddlers with flute-like voices who went at a jog-trot, with noses all reddened, in the snow, to the bearded tenors that were strung out in graduated rows according to their height, like the pipes of the organ whose function they were going to carry out. A smartly administered cuff on the head brought back into the ranks any of the youngsters that

lagged and loitered and that were prematurely puffing out their cheeks and blowing on their frost-nipped fingers in testimony to the roughness of the winter. The regiments of Preobrazhensky, of Semenowski, of Inkermann, and the artillery of the Guards formed the double row that lined the route of march; every officer stood motionless, his sword held at the salute, as the mortal remains of the Empress went by.

Stiff in his bearing, looking sickly and puny, and making but an indifferent attempt to hide his antics from the dumbfounded crowd, while his too tightly fitting gaiters gave his walk a constrained and uneasy air, Peter III came leading the mourners' party. A stray cur joined him and kept up an excited yelping; the incident provoked, from the idle loungers that looked on, a number of facetious comments that were quickly stifled.

Catherine, in her carriage, affected an attitude and bearing of overwhelming grief, and her deep distress commanded the respect of the people, who gave proof of it by bowing deeply and crossing themselves. A group of peasant women, with their red kerchiefs knotted beneath their chins, struck their foreheads against the frozen ground and cried out in chorus: " Protect us, Little Mother, thou art a saint from Paradise." " Amen," replied

the assembled moujiks. " She, she yonder will have pity upon us."

Lieutenant Orloff, attracted by all this pageantry and the glare of lighted lanterns, has a peep at a profile worthy of a goddess, even though it be veiled in hypocritical grief. All of a sudden recognition dawns upon him. In the very august person of his Sovereign he rediscovers the mad mistress who had intoxicated him more than wine; the very one, yes, whose amorous sighs had been breathed into his ear. It was Catherine, his Catherine! The she-devil, how fresh and alluring her mouth was! A flood of insane pride took possession of him. He would have liked to call the marching regiments to witness, proclaim his great good fortune to the throng, to the Worontsoffs and the Shuvaloffs, dance, sing, awaken the dead Empress, or confide his joy to old Marshal Razumovski, the clandestine widower who, bathed in tears, was following the corpse which had been the body that he had so often pressed to his heart. Orloff hoped above all else to attract Catherine's attention. But she, unconscious of his presence, saw nothing but the city that was to serve her as a stage whereon, costumed as Minerva or as Bellona by turns, she was going to make Europe burn the incense of homage to her.

On the way back from the interment, the

Baron de Breteuil, Ambassador of France, worn out beyond endurance by the Slavonic liturgy, felt as though his short legs had been cut off where they joined his body. He was, moreover, astounded by the bantering and chaffing in which the Emperor had indulged so freely during the funeral ceremony. What a scandalous proceeding! His Majesty kept speaking in a loud voice, though turned towards the casket, flung invectives at the spectators, bawled out the Kyries in a manner fit to make himself hoarse, and kept up a constant grimacing that left the pious nuns in bewilderment and amazement.

"May the devil run away with me," said Breteuil, "if I can say what will be the attitude of the Tsar towards his allies." He was quite perplexed, and kept revolving the problem in his big head: "Yes or no, are the Russians going to fight or to conclude a peace? What is to be done?" Must he wear out his eloquence in talking to the winds that blow over the Baltic, while at the same time he kissed the generals on the mouth? Faugh! the ugly, nasty custom! The French Ambassador had scarcely any stomach for this sort of embrace.

In what new caprice was the eccentric Peter now going to take pleasure? Would he fetch some hundred thousand men over to Frederick, as a child gives up its leaden soldiers to a play-

mate? Breteuil had not long to wait to learn the truth. The obstreperous Peter was getting ready to play him a trick quite in the former's characteristic style. One evening, after asking him to share his supper, the Emperor jumped up hastily from the table, between the first and second courses, upset his chair, threw himself upon his knees, and, glass in hand, cried out in a fit of warlike exaltation, as he faced the portrait of the King of Prussia: " Brother mine, together we shall conquer the whole world! "

The Ambassador of France had no other course left open to him but to pack his trunks. He stormed and blustered, but, curious to watch the trend of events, he had the brains not to leave a country where patience is ruler of destiny. The malcontents swelled their numbers; everyone complained of the conduct of the Emperor, whose whimsies made people shudder. It was learned, to the general dismay, that he had placed an order with the cabinet-maker of the Fontanka for some score of beds which he designed to force on as many newly-wed couples. To annul the marriage of his courtiers, group by group, and allot them different mates in a second wedding, became his obsessing hobby. He laughed heartily at this farce; he himself, practising what he preached, was to take his place, he said, in one

of these batches and be married again. The already united pairs trembled and shivered at the thought of having forced upon them, this one a lord and master for whom she could feel nothing but aversion, that one some detested help-meet. They accosted one another with: "Are you the one to be my husband? Are you picked out for my wife?" The marriage certificates were all duly prepared, the mattresses filled with feathers, the popes notified. As to the consent of the parties, there was no question of troubling about it.

In response to an Imperial order, Soltykoff had returned. Pressure was brought to bear upon him to make him publicly acknowledge that he was the father of the Tsarevitch; but Sergei felt a strong repugnance against being the cause of the undoing of the Catherine of his youth, the tender and laughing companion of his happy days.

Before shutting his wife up in a nunnery, the Emperor had determined to parade her through the city, to be the butt of the derision and scorn of the populace, with a placard on her back, written by his own hand, whereon the crowd might see, in huge letters: "Mother of the Bastard," and, in order that the unlettered element might lose no whit of the spicy tidings, a public crier was to proclaim it aloud amongst the crowds.

The inscription might as well have been put in the plural. Thanks to her gentleman-of-the-bed-chamber, Skurin, who lent himself to this dangerous game, Catherine had smuggled her latest bastard off by way of the servants' back-stairs. Orloff was as prolific a begetter of children as an apple-tree is of apples, and Catherine offered herself without stint. Such generosity was not lacking in heroic qualities, since her husband was an autocrat by divine right and since she no longer shared his bed.

Into her own, however, she had neglected to invite Prudence.

In April, then, Catherine was about to become a mother for the third time; it was in vain that she laced up her stays tight enough to stifle herself, for the infant had made up its mind to see the light of day. It was forced, however, to come into the world in silence, without either compliments or fire-crackers. Hush! the husband's suspicions are aroused, and he is patiently and perseveringly on the watch for a glorious explosion of scandal and exposure. The fatal term is drawing to a close. What stratagem can they think up to side-track the Emperor's crafty watchfulness? In sullen fury he is walking up and down, up and down the royal apartments, winking and blinking his sly and shifty eyes, his pipe stuck in his mouth.

At the first pain she calls her valet de chambre. By a happy inspiration, Skurin remembers the intense delight Peter takes at the sight of a fire of goodly proportions. And so, without a moment's hesitation, he runs out and sets fire to a bundle of twigs beneath the roof of his own house situated in the suburb called Vassiliostro. "Fire! fire!" The alarm sounds its warning. What flames, what a marvellous jet of flickering tongues! The smoke rises in magnificent spirals. . . . The Emperor tears off at full speed to help put out the conflagration, while timbers crackle, the green roof twists and buckles, and the paint spreads abroad the pungent odour of turpentine. What a tremendous piece of good luck! They stretch a bucket-chain of willing helpers right down to the river bank, the hurriedly handled water splashes over the feet of His Majesty, who is shouting out oaths and scattering, all at one and the same time, a rain of blows with his stick amongst his beloved subjects: he is the happiest man in the world!

Meantime, Catherine, brave creature that she is, stifles her cries beneath a woolen blanket. She has barely time to give birth to a boy, whom they name Bobrinsky, or the "little eagle in the furs." His father, Orloff, carries him off swathed in his own wadded great-coat, while Catherine, pale and far from well, must

go on with her exacting and wearing task of Empress. She said to Narushkin, who had just come back from seeing the fire: "You have little idea of what it costs, sometimes, to be comely."

What a degree of ingenious plotting they had to have recourse to in order to keep this intimacy secret! and yet Orloff scarcely left her side any more than her own shadow. Without a doubt the obscurity of his birth was an asset in favour of this love affair, which the most suspicious busybodies would have been unable to unearth. "If Orloff is a nobody," thought Catherine, "so much the better! my love will make him famous. I shall raise him above the ancient nobility of the boiars; I shall cut for him out of my ermine a little muff of the softest."

Catherine's instinct had discovered the vigorous partner of whom she stood in need in order to hoist herself up to the throne, which, in Russia, is neither hereditary nor elective, but *occupative*. Every man in his proper place and his bed for his spring-board — there you have its device. At the instant when biceps become useful adjuncts, chance directs her, in response to the urge of her sexual craving, to go marauding in a family of giants. At every critical epoch of her life, the intuitive wisdom of her emotions, like a weathercock in

search of the wind, guided her unerringly to the man she needed: after Soltykoff, the infatuation of her maturing womanhood, came Poniatowski, the dandy par excellence of politics blended with love-intrigues, and finally Orloff, hunter of bears and fomentor and bulwark of Revolution.

The Baron de Breteuil, weighing his words, wrote as follows to Versailles: " I should not be surprised, knowing as I do the courage and the uncurbable force of character of the Empress, if she were to resort to some extreme measure."

VIII

NECK OR NOTHING

"YOU'VE got to kill off the bees if you would eat your honey in peace," says a Russian proverb.

On Thursday, the eighth of July, 1762, at the Palace of Peterhof, the Empress has retired to her room, the windows of which open out on the terraced grounds. It is a close and sultry day. Is the storm that hangs heavily over her heart about to burst in its fury? The dashing, beating rain brings a touch of refreshing cool. At the end of the green carpet of the sward it forms, on the skyline over the sea, a figure like an interrogation mark. Catherine, standing motionless, is interrogating Fate.

Is she doubtful of the future she has entrusted to the three Orloff brothers, three merry blades who, for love of her, are ready for any and everything? Born leaders of men, these three. The soldiery are gone mad over them. They have sworn to follow them to the death. Heads such as angels bear, muscles of

iron, and hearts of steel. Such are the conspirators who are to offer her a crown. For once, these risk-alls have left nothing to chance. The Emperor saw fit to disband the Guard and cashier the officers. Gregor Orloff bribes them over, one by one, with 200,000 roubles stolen from the regimental strong-box. Peter made the threat of changing the State religion. Gregor suborns the clergy in the name of the Empress. Our three officers have gone on a campaign all through the various barracks, promising commissions and decorations. Generosity comes cheap, since they pour out gold by the bucketfuls, and the amber-coloured honey-mead overflows the wooden vessels. Glasses are clinked against the upturned drums.

On the eve of this miraculous adventure which is to change the whole course of her life, was she melancholy or happy, this Empress of thirty-three, as fresh and full of the promise of maturity as a peony half-opened in some well-kept garden? Her smooth cheeks are as tempting as apples; one might bite into them with great gusto. She sparkles with life, her warm blood bubbles through the blue veins that course over her plump, full breasts. But that is of no consequence just now, she leaves it to bubble at its pleasure. On this evening spent in lonely contemplation, this evening

when hope has reached its climax and has raised her to fortune's highest pinnacle, Catherine is occupied with weighing her chances, looking back over her past life, and taking a glimpse at the beckoning radiance of the future; for with her everything is cold calculation, even her sublime flights of audacity.

Eighteen years have now passed, during which she has wasted her time in the chill of boredom and loneliness; for eighteen years she has been putting up with the clumsy brutishness of her husband. Now she bluntly refuses to any longer stomach such insults as that which he threw in her face, like a spatter of mud and filth, at the last Peace-banquet, in the presence of some four hundred people, when he cried out at her across the table: "dura!" (you crazy fool) — the word still rings in her ears. He dared to do it! The colour rises in her cheeks at the memory. Since this maniac has finally lost the little modicum of brains he used to have, if indeed he ever did have any, let us leave him to his fate! Catherine, trusting implicitly in the bold resourcefulness and the manly courage of the Orloffs, goes peacefully and calmly to bed and makes an appointment with Chance for the morrow. Is Friday, by the way, a lucky day on which to stage a revolution?

At five o'clock the following morning Alexis

Orloff enters without knocking. "I come to fetch you, Madame; everything is in readiness." The Empress gets hurriedly into her clothes; a little rose-water on her fingers, a dab of powder on her nose, and she is ready.

She asks simply: "Where is the Emperor?"

"At Oranienbaum."

"What is going forward?"

"Before evening-prayers the rumour spread like a train of gunpowder that His Majesty had had you arrested. At news of this a soldier ran at top speed from barracks to barracks with the announcement that you were a dead woman. Immediately the alarm was given. Come, Madame, to St. Petersburg with me; we shall proclaim you Sovereign of our hearts and of Great Russia!"

At five versts from the city Gregor Orloff meets them, climbs up on the carriage-seat, his colour heightened, looking pink and strong, tender and captivating, and publicly advertising his passionate devotion by a thousand silly antics. The love-smitten couple exchange understanding looks. Pride blazes and gleams in Catherine's clear eyes. Where the sandy road makes heavy going, the horses founder and refuse to go forward. God be praised! here comes the hairdressers' closed carriage. What a strange equipage! An Empress, with

her lover and her wig-maker on either side of her, — this is the trio on its way to make a revolution!

Catherine has crossed the courtyard of the Ismailoïvski barracks. A drum beats the salute. The soldiers pour out on all sides, and jostle her in their enthusiasm. Such lack of order! such shouts! A hot rivalry ensues to kiss her hand, to embrace her boots, to handle and stroke her garments in frenzied devotion. They bawl, and scream, and yell at the top of their voices: " Here comes who shall save us! "

Catherine laughs full-throated, and shows her whole set of gleaming teeth. Her radiant manner pleases the troops, her plump multicurved charm puts them in high spirits! Two Cossacks drag into the courtyard a bewildered priest. Gregor prays him to raise his cross. In a chorus of shrill harsh voices, the officers swear fealty to Catherine. On, on to Our Lady of Kazan!

The clergy has joined the procession. In his headlong hurry Father Ambrose has put on his mitre the wrong way 'round: enamels, diamonds, opalines gleam and glisten in the sun. He comes forward in his sky-blue cape, with the orb, the symbol of empire, leaning against his fan-shaped beard. The Empress seizes the orb. How light is the golden ball in her little

determined hand! At this gesture the soldiers break into loud applause, sing, shout their glee; the bells of St. Nicholas reply to the chimes of St. Andrew. Catherine weeps with joy, emotion, and fear as well.

Near the Kosanski gardens, Princess Daschkoff makes her appearance; the men grab the little creature bodily and dance her up and down like a doll to the accompaniment of loud huzzahs. In the merry struggle her sleeves are torn to ribbons, she is in rags. Catherine plucks her away from her admirers and leaps on horseback. The Empress has borrowed the uniform of Captain Galitzin. She is wearing a flat sable cap, and over this she has slipped a crown of laurel leaves; her hair floats loosely over her shoulders, her cheeks are aflame. The green breeches closely fitting over her beautifully-shaped legs that betray the fire and impetuosity of her temperament as they take a tight grip of her chestnut steed, her sword held firmly in her hand, she lacks nothing but a sword-knot to complete the picture of a fascinating amazon.

Who is the shy young man that comes up trembling to offer her the silver tassel that she has lost in the scrimmage? It is Potemkin, an under-officer of no importance. He has not even a single stripe. Catherine fixes her gaze on the radiant features of the young fellow as

he draws near. What a lover he would make! More woman than sovereign, she casts her glances all around in the desire to please all men, and makes herself inviting to each. Preceded by the drums, fifes and clarinets, she rides at the head of the troop. " My children, come follow your colonel! " And without hesitancy or studied formality she leads the regiments off in the direction of Peterhoff where the Emperor was to dine.

Half-way on the road, halt! General Ismailoff throws himself at her feet: " I am the bearer to Your Majesty of the Emperor's abdication. Here is his letter. He renounces all claim to the crown. He is plunged in tears, Madame."

" God be praised! " cries Catherine, " I shall thus spare my country the scourge of civil war. Outside of his liberty of person, you may tell your master that he will be granted anything he wishes."

Then, without delay, she sends Alexis Orloff to keep an eye on her husband, for there was some talk of the peasants rising in his favour.

The Empress retraces her steps. What a cavalcade! Escorted by the Preobrazhenski regiments she re-enters her capital in triumph, and is received with the smiles of her people. On the Palace steps await her, besides her son,

the whole Court and the Holy Synod. Voiceless, broken by her emotions, she throws herself fully dressed upon her bed.

There are days when things all get jumbled and muddled, and yet become linked up in a connected chain. Catherine's imagination embellishes the series of events wherein ambition and love, from dawn to dark, have been her faithful partners. Thanks to them she has won her stake-all gamble. Here she stands now, autocratic ruler of this vast empire, with no one to gainsay her from henceforth, except her lover, whose prisoner she is because she loves him.

Next day, towards the close of the afternoon, Orloff was comfortably sprawled in the Empress' bed-room, one of his muddy boots trailing over the shining hard-wood floor. He yawned repeatedly as he tore open dispatches, petitions, humble entreaties.

With an air that blends familiarity and masterfulness, he surrenders his leg with its fuzzy growth of reddish hair to the care of Her Majesty, who is tenderly dressing a number of scratches he received while in pursuit of a group of peasants that had persisted in doggedly defending the Tsar with their sickles.

Over the city a late twilight of a coppery hue was spreading its lingering glow; it was

still bright enough to see. Through the open windows rose the loud huzzahs, all the last vibrating echoes of a revolution that burns itself out in a flicker of rejoicing.

The tiny Princess Daschkoff, with her characteristic lack of discretion, and still harbouring the belief that she is the spoiled child of fortune, pushes open the door without standing on ceremony and, seeing Orloff in this outlandish posture, says to him: " What are you doing there, you scamp? Do not rip open those envelopes, no one has any right to touch them; they are State papers."

" She asked me to take a look at them," replies Orloff indifferently, and pointing his finger at the Empress. The Princess blushes, and finds it impossible to dissemble the antipathy she feels for this athlete who is so sure of himself, and who comes between her and her benefactress; and, seeing that the infatuated pair are taking no more notice of her, she murmurs: " I was hoping that the services that friendship had rendered would never be considered as a burden." Catherine, for very shame and bashfulness, dares not dismiss her, and keeps looking from her lover to the alcove and back again.

Suddenly it dawns upon her that the whole vast world of Russia belongs to her, outright,

with its immense tracts of virgin soil and its rivers of piteous plaint. Is it possible? The very caprices of Her Majesty will be enough to found a cult. Does she wish for watermelons? She is very fond of them: she will declare war to have them to sow in her kitchen-gardens. Has she a preference for caviar, those piquant and salty pearls that astonish the unsuspecting tongue? There will arrive flotilla upon flotilla to fetch it right to the Palace gate. The Tsarina is all powerful, she can force the recognition of her favourites upon the world, and even transform them into great lords. Why not?

Quick! a brand new parchment! She is about to draw up her first ukase, in favour of Lieutenant Gregor Orloff, her lover. Lucky dog! he is going to have a rank that will make his rivals pale with jealousy, and the title of Count will fit him to perfection. Where is the Imperial seal? With the demure application of a little girl writing a page in her copy-book she signs, with a tremor of her hand: "Catherine." A growing pride swells within her and puts her quite beside herself. What a fine flourish of a signature! At last she is free to convert her joyous moments into presents, barter her lands, exchange her serfs for kisses. If she is joyful, Gregor must be happy, then let the whole people break into demonstrations of

joy: she decrees no less. How can one escape feeling happy after a revolution that ends in apotheosis without a single moujik having laid down his life as its price?

" Come, dear Count Gregor," she murmurs coquettishly, " let me give you your reward."

These words are scarcely uttered when Alexis Orloff bursts into the room, his hair in disorder, the sweat pouring down his pale horror-stricken face, and a red scar streaking his cheek with a daub of blood. In a frenzy of despair, and reeling under the stress of his emotions, he throws himself in a heap at Catherine's feet and prefaces his grief-oppressed confession by a deliberate and excursive sign of the cross:

" Little Mother, he is no longer of this world. And yet no one had planned his death. How should we ever have dared to lift our hands against the Emperor? But alas! Imperial Mistress, this misfortune has occurred. We were intoxicated, and he too. He quarrelled at table with Prince Theodor Bariatinsky; by the time we separated them he was no more — it all happened so swiftly. But we are all equally guilty and deserve the same punishment. Have mercy on me, Your Majesty, if only for the love you bear my brother. I have told you everything, I have told you everything! There is nothing more to seek.

Sad is our lot now in this world, for we have merited your anger and have lost our souls for ever."

Catherine rises to her feet and says: "The horror that this death inflicts on me cannot be put into words; it is an overwhelming blow."

"Madame," exclaims Princess Daschkoff, "it is a death quite too sudden for your good name and for mine."

In silence Catherine precedes Alexis Orloff into the adjoining room. When she returned, she was smiling; her tears she placed in the same category with her mourning-dresses — made to order.

In the various foreign capitals, papers publishing the surprising, the truly prodigious news were snatched from hand to hand. Frederick II shouted from Potsdam: "Peter is a weak-minded fool, he has let himself be dethroned in the same way as a child is sent off to bed." At Warsaw, love getting the upper hand over reason, Stanislas Poniatowski had but one burning desire: to cross the frontier, let it cost him what it might, in order to rejoin his well-beloved in her hour of victory and now that she wears the crown at last. There he frets in exile, ever on the watch, closely scanning every mail, and awaiting his recall

with a feverish impatience that nothing can allay.

Imagine his disillusion at the very first despatch, which trembles in his hands as he reads: "If you come here, you will invite our being massacred, both of us; I shall write to you at greater length tomorrow."

Gregor Orloff and his brothers would not have recoiled from any sort of bravo-work; they kept strict watch about their Imperial mistress, whom they bandied back and forth the one to the other in a kind of family cross-step.

By what means can she rid herself of Stanislas who is now a thorn in the flesh to her? Our wily and clear-sighted Catherine has hit on it. As a gift betokening the delight it affords her to sever this early tie, she will make him a present of Poland. A kingdom — 'tis a sufficiently generous reward, surely; and without a moment's delay she transmits her decision to him. Then, on a sheet of paper of magnificent quality, and framed in a border of gold, she dashes off, without a single pause, the following letter to Stanislas Poniatowski:—

"August 2, 1762

"I am sending Count Kayserling, the Polish Ambassador, to make you King, after the de-

cease of the present ruler. Here the public is still in a state of fermentation; I pray you to restrain your desire to come here, for fear of increasing the general unrest.

"God's kind providence has brought everything to the end which His goodness proposed, and this is all the more of a miracle than any deed foreseen and pre-arranged, for so many happy combinations of circumstances can not come together save as the hand of God brings them.

"I have received your letter. A regular correspondence between us would be exposed to a thousand inconveniences, and I have not the time to write love-letters; besides, they might be prejudicial to the best interests of us both. I am very much worried and hard-pressed; I have to observe the utmost precaution in a thousand different directions. I shall do everything in my power for you and your family, and in addition I feel the whole weight of the government upon me.

"Farewell. There are in this world some strange situations."

A strange situation indeed. If Europe awaits the outcome before showering its plaudits, Voltaire, for his part, cannot withhold his comment, and writes to Mme du Deffand:

"I am well aware that a few trifling reproaches anent her relations with her husband are being levelled at Katy, but these are family matters in which I make it a rule not to interfere."

IX

THE SUITORS

THE Empress is now widowed and free. When she was setting her kindly hypocrisy to work to hush and patch up the scandal of Peter's death, to what extent did she believe her own lies? "I do not yield obedience to the rules of morality in the abstract, which I never could understand," she was wont to say, "I let myself be guided by my heart." What did she mean by her heart? Catherine readily confused the rhythmic beats of this organ with the titillating tumult of the senses. She made no distinction between their sighs, their nuances, their thrills. These senses of ours are delicate instruments, and one must learn how to use them; while she used hers without any reservation or analysis. The night on which she forgot herself with the murderer of her husband was to her a night like any other of her nights. She was no sadist, and she held him folded in her arms until morning without giving the matter a second thought. Why should she have had any re-

morse? Providence had taken thought for everything, except that it had failed to pour the soothing flood of forgetfulness into the memory of Alexis Orloff, who, poor devil, even while he strained his mistress to his bosom could not escape the recurring qualms of self-reproach for his hasty-handedness. Pursued by the cries of the Tsar, who kept bellowing loudly for his dog, his negro dwarf, his violin; haunted by the memory of that throat so tightly strangled in the black kerchief, the wretch kept seeing the writhings of that contorted body, and the shrivelled corpse remained the stubborn obsession of his nightmare visions.

So then, the Empress was free. Her Majesty was no mediocre match. Consequently her various wooers, who were unacquainted with fear, took it into their heads to wed her. Stanislas, Orloff, and Potemkin paid their court to her, each one in accordance with his temperament; the first with sighs, the second with brutal roughness, the third with oily speeches and the most dazzling fancifulness of a freakish imagination.

Biding his time before formally putting in his claim, Gregor Orloff, forgetful of all the social distance between them, amused himself by beating her black and blue; a pastime that gave spice to their intimacy. It was not that she particularly liked being beaten, arrogant

tyrant as she was, but after she had been thoroughly feasted in her canopy-bed, beneath the linen sheets, made glistening white by blueing, her dreams were sweeter.

But now comes Stanislas with his talk of putting in an appearance in St. Petersburg. What a nuisance to be a widow! Such complications this move of his will cause! How is she to side-track her suitors?

" For pity's sake, do not make me a king," runs Stanislas's humble prayer, " recall me to your side." In his private diary he adds: " I care not for a throne unless I may have the certainty of wedding the Empress. Without her, the crown has no charms for me. . . Near her I shall do more for the good of Poland as a simple citizen than I can here as King; and yet, if I were to be King, the Empress might think of marrying me; while without that the marriage will never take place."

And while the Polish nobleman lacks decision and wavers between the claims of fatherland, ambition, and love, Catherine is moved by a single fear: Orloff. " You read my letters with but scant attention," she writes to Stanislas. " I have told you time and time again that I shall be exposed to the most serious risks from a number of different quarters if you put your feet on Russian soil. You give way to despair, I see; I am surprised at you, for

after all every sensible man has to make up his mind."

The Empress had made up hers to wed Gregor Orloff. In a regular flutter over this momentous decision she convokes her Council, — a mere formality dictated by courtesy, since the Imperial will is sovereign. To her consternation, Panin rises to his tall height: "The Empress can do what she pleases, but Madame Orloff will never be Empress."

Catherine did not insist.

When Count Tcheremetieff, Lord High Chamberlain, and other Muscovite lords were asked to attend the doleful morning reception of the favourite, or to stand around in a circle at the carriage-door while Orloff, buried in the soft cushions, lounged at his ease, his fingers intertwined with Catherine's, they gave vent to half-smothered remonstrances. Razumovski and Count Buturlin took their courage in both hands, shouting out their protests so all could hear. But Catherine was under the spell of her amorousness; little heed she paid to either murmurs or grievous complaints.

Orloff is omnipotent. He adorns his person with a portrait of the Empress set in diamonds larger than hazel-nuts; this he wears in a way to make it seen of all eyes. He parades it, and himself attracts public notice, with a low blackguardism that does not stop short of cer-

tain pranks and freaks of misconduct, the airing of which causes an uproar that scandalizes the least timorous-hearted. It is a fact that this portrait is the badge and symbol of his office. As for Catherine, the blending of love and fear makes her tractable and submissive, and that in spite of a number of unfaithfulnesses which sometimes lasted for several weeks at a spell. The ungrateful wretch, where was he spending his time? At bear-hunting? For her Hercules was fond of pitting himself, armed with a boar-spear, against the hairy giants that all of a sudden lift their mighty shapes beneath the white pines. Or else, is he at the tavern? The truth is, he was taking liberties with some easy-living light-o'-love between two drams of vodka.

But now, on the banks of the Volga, rebellion raises its noisy head. Immediately love, quarrels, and the exacting questions of precedence are relegated to the background. Pugatchieff, a deserter, whose features bore a remarkable resemblance to those of Peter III, passes himself off as the Emperor who has given his executioners the slip; he issues a proclamation that he is on his way to chastise the Empress in her very Palace and place the crown on the head of his son. The youthful Grand Duke Paul, to whom a serving man repeats these words, exclaims: " When I grow up, I

am going to have restored to me the throne that Mamma has usurped." Catherine has quite different ideas on the matter. Since this child may one day become her master and her Emperor, she little by little cuts off his stay in the Palace, where he is to have no place before her death. But the people, credulous by nature, fond of legends, and eager for any opportunity to rise in revolt, follows the fortunes of Pugatchieff, slayer of nobles and protector of soldiers and peasants, who spends his time palavering in the villages and making vast promises on the strength of other people's riches.

Attacked over an area that spread from Kazan, the Tatar city, all the way to Orenburg, this wily fellow eludes capture; the *izbas* [1] give him asylum, a thousand devoted souls keep watch over him; by a miracle, he even beats the generals sent to take him. He is everywhere at once, invisible, and powerful.

The country was in a tremor of dismay over Pugatchieff, when one day, caught off his guard, he was betrayed by some of his fellow-plotters and brought to Moscow in an iron cage.

"This will end with hangings," said the Empress, who had already become less under the sway of philosophic ideals; "I detest violence." But nevertheless she signed the

[1] Peasant's huts.

order for his execution, for she was not partial to ghosts.

Superstition threatened to play her a mean turn, and impostors were many and dangerous. Later, a drunken sot, Bogomoloff, had the strange fancy to pass himself off as her husband, and she had his nose cut off to refresh his memory, ordered the knout without mercy, and sent him to Siberia to meditate on the madness of aspiring to greatness.

And now, the plague is in Moscow.

By way of a delicate attention, Gregor Orloff is sent to stamp out the death-dealing epidemic. He is a stranger to fear. The city is freed of the incubus, order re-established, the plague in flight.

At St. Petersburg, some time after this, in the silence of the sleeping city Catherine is opening her morning mail. It is half-past six; she has already lighted her fire herself, the yelping lap-dog will soon be getting its dish of cream, and she has drunk her very strong coffee. She opens a letter from M. de Voltaire: " The Grand Master M. Orloff is an angel of consolation, he has performed a feat of heroism. I take it that this deed of his must have profoundly stirred your feelings, divided as they are between fear and admiration."

Has Catherine any fear of losing him by exposing him to death? She dares not reply to

the question. The terrible friend is on his way back. Quick, let an Arch of Triumph in rose-pink marble be reared on the Gatchina road! her hero is of the stamp of those ancient Romans of the Republican era whose courage and greatness of soul are his.

He has won Catherine all over again. But she is dreaming of new exploits. It is Alexis Orloff, brother of Gregor, who is destined to carry them through. Master of Negropont, he wins the naval battle of Tchesmé, with the aid of favouring winds, an English admiral, and a Catalonian adventurer. Whereupon Voltaire continues his comment: "One can make no rejoinder to a battle won; laurels on a head full of brains produce the finest effect of any spectacle in this world. Madame, Your Imperial Majesty, by slaying the Turks, gives me a fresh lease of life. Allah! Catharina. I was quite right, it turns out; I was more of a prophet than Mahomet. All of these Counts Orloff are heroes and I look upon you as the happiest, as well as the first Princess of the universe."

Catherine the Great has among her lovers Good Luck, who, alone of them all, remains faithful to her always. The "Princess of the universe" would have been greatly obliged to the said heroes if they had tarried awhile to gather their laurel-wreaths in the deep blue

waters, so that she might have some fleeting taste of the joys of freedom. But, alas! here comes Alexis posting back in haste: " He fell about our ears like an avalanche! "

✣

This evening there is merry-making afoot at Court; the Empress is receiving in her apartments at the Hermitage. Where has she learnt the art of dramatic effect? She comes forward with majesty in her mien, gracefully balancing her wide hoop-skirt of yellow satin. By dint of stretching her neck she produces the illusion of being tall. The ribbon of the Order of St. Andrew, gathered in a pucker at her waist, cuts a sky-blue swathe across the curve of her bodice on which jewels sparkle. A little crown sits at a rakish angle on top of her hair which is drawn straight back in the Chinese fashion, the better to show off her commanding brow with its touch of genius. Her row of ringlets hangs caressingly over a pair of shoulders that are glisteningly white and exquisitely rounded. A light dusting of powder sheds a silvery glow over her head-dress. Three curtsies as she enters the room, to left, to right, and in the middle, allow her mobile features to fix their gaze on one group after the other: she has seen whatever there is to see. Then the Empress takes her seat at one of the gaming-

tables where her regular partners form a circle about her.

The younger set is playing macao, the winners having the right to dip up and take a spoonful of diamonds from the mass of these gems piled in a jasper bowl. No one foregoes the privilege; pretty fingers do a bit of cheating aided by the winks of accomplices. Amidst shouts of glee and bursts of laughter not free from a tang of jealousy, the guests share the remainder of the loot spread so lavishly on the table. What a scene of lively jollity! Lords and ladies are already picturing their court-dresses transformed into dazzling reliquaries. As for Her Majesty, she is playing to the tune of ten roubles a throw, and in the most serious and intent manner possible, with Alexis Orloff, Stackelberg, and Strogonoff. The last is losing steadily and becoming irritable in consequence.

More discontented with his luck than usual, he was beginning to lose his nerve, and forgetting the presence of the Empress, he started to pace up and down the room: "If it goes on like this, I am going to lose all my money, I shall be ruined."

Arkharoff tried to get him to keep still.

"Never mind him, I am quite used to his fits and starts. He has been grumbling and grouching like this for years. I do not like

losing either, I have my own method of play. Tell us, Potemkin, do I not play according to the rules? "

The Empress took delight in interrogating Potemkin and made no scruples about turning to her future favourite and asking his advice, for he knew how to flatter with tact and skill, and plied the delicate art of eulogy with a greater degree of finish than anyone else. Ever since the episode of the lost sword-knot, on the day of the revolution, the young under-officer, since nominated colonel and chamberlain, had his entrée to the Palace.

This evening, at this very lively party, Alexis Orloff was Her Majesty's partner. Potemkin had gone closer to the Empress on her addressing him; leaning over his shoulder, he was answering her in Russian.

" You are forgetting your manners," cried Orloff; " since Her Majesty speaks to you in French, it is your duty to reply to her in that language."

" And since when " returned Potemkin, " is it impertinent to reply to one's Sovereign in the language of the country. For the rest, I have not to take orders from you."

He was by now grazing her cheek as he bent over to see her cards, and putting his lips close to her ear while he mimicked Orloff's voice: " What are trumps, Madame? "

Alexis, irritated by this manœuvre, shouted to him: " Leave Her Majesty alone. Get out of this, you ugly parrot! "

" I shall remain, if you please, all night long, if my presence is not irksome to my gracious Sovereign."

" Potemkin, give me your advice. Should I play a heart? " asks Catherine quite calmly, and in high amusement over this quarrel of which she is the stake.

" See now, we two have all the trumps. My word, I believe you bring me luck."

" Be off! " shouted Orloff, purple with rage and leaping to his feet. The two men eyed each other up and down. Alexis Orloff, feeling that his ascendancy is on the wane, brings his fist down with a bang on the table. The cards are scattered in every direction.

Although she was flattered by this species of cock-fight, the Empress, well acquainted with the coarse and violent temper of these men when they were roused to fury, thought it more prudent to make her escape.

Potemkin came up to Alexis: " You murderer! you are nothing but a murderer, that is, a coward. Our Mistress is quite right, you are nothing more than a peasant, you make love in the same way as you eat, you are just as well suited with a Kalmuck wench as with a pretty woman. In brief, you are nought but

a Burlák! "[1] Alexis had caught up a billiard-cue that lay stretched on the sofa, and whirling it 'round and 'round his head retorted with: "You petty friar, you false priest, you thief, you son of a dog! I shall bore a hole in your hide with every one of the sabres stacked in the armouries."

Alexis walked up and down the room, smashing the chairs, which flew into splinters. In his rage the skirts of his coat were torn to ribbons. Where were the diamond studs? Torn off and lost. Potemkin, more calm, kept looking at the jealousy-crazed idiot and his growing disorder of dress, and was reflecting that this madman's fury augured well for his own chances, when all of a sudden, before he could get on his guard, Orloff fetched him so violent a blow on the head that the blood spurted from his eyes. Potemkin felt his eyeball split in two; blinded, his hands over his eyelids, he made his way out. Next day he was minus an eye. In his despair, he shut himself up in a country-house at some distance from the city, and there he bid fair to lose his reason. Alexis had won the evening's dispute.

[1] A deck-hand on the Volga-boats, a *hauler;* used as a term of reproach in Russia, to mean a rude, clownish fellow, a boor.

X

POTEMKIN

THE Empress is enjoying a holiday, her lovers are at the front. As she lives in dread of the stealers of hearts whose keys open locks like practised house-breakers, she is taking advantage of the absence of the Orloffs to quietly remove their effects. Nimbly she changes bolts and latches and laughs heartily at the trick she is about to play.

Gregor Orloff, "face to face with the hideous bearded monsters of Turks," is at Jassy, showing off his new coat studded with diamonds. He dazzles the Moldavian ladies who, as they chatter, keep fingering their amber beads, seated on silken divans and blinking their long soft lashes. Potemkin, still suffering from nervous depression, is besieging Silistria and waiting for his appointment as lieutenant-general. It is at this juncture that Catherine grows bold and installs in the locked room her latest fancy, Vassiltchikoff. This is a short, very swarthy young fellow of noble birth, whom her prying eye lost no time in spotting

one day while she leaned out of the carriage-door as her eight milk-white horses bore her at a gallop along the road to Tsarskoë-Selo.

No preface or preliminaries here; to make his acquaintance she sends the elegant officer a golden snuff-box. She is radiant. In pursuit of her orders, which hereafter became the rule of the royal household, young Vassiltchikoff undergoes a medical examination. Doctor Rogerson, without any ceremony, examines the candidate minutely, turning him front and back, in order to make sure that his health will not cause any anxiety to his gracious sovereign.

Vassiltchikoff submits, a trifle curious, a trifle timid at having to pass this examining-board, and sticks out his tongue like any raw recruit. Mlle Protassoff and Countess Bruce are charged with the task of ravishing his secrets from him, and of preserving the register of them: a first step over which these ladies dispute with one another as to their respective turns; but they must beware of any return-engagement! The protocol calls for a minute report of findings, but will not allow of any yielding to the caprice of infatuation on the part of the reporters. The test brought to an end, and the candidate admitted, what luxury he finds awaiting him, what riches, what a

train of servants, and, to put him in good spirits, in a drawer left conspicuously half-open, a hundred thousand roubles ready for his squandering! The appointed evening arrived, Catherine places her hand with a gesture of authority and possession on the arm of her chosen gallant, while he, blushing red with pride, becomes the cynosure of every hatred and every jealousy within the capital. She carries him off with the air of a bride on her honeymoon.

The Orloff connection, seeing the Empress beaming with unconcealed happiness, stops its crowing and in feverish haste packs off a messenger to Moldavia to carry word to the distant favourite. Orloff, rendered ill at ease, leaps fully accoutred from one horse to another and makes his way back without drawing rein; he stops neither to eat nor to drink. Is it fear of his downfall that makes him cross steppes, swamps, and harvest-lands at one single stretch? Is Catherine for him nothing but an aged mistress who scatters preferments, or else does he feel the harpoon-stroke of jealousy? He scarcely gives himself time for self-analysis, but gallops on, his brain empty of thought. It is a vain piece of reckless hurry. At the very gates of St. Petersburg an order stops and stuns him. He is politely asked to go into quarantine at Gatchina.

The Empress refuses to see him; nevertheless she still has a degree of affection for him. Between the love that she is parading to-day and her sentiment of yesterday, is there no room for friendship? She softens, and interrogates Pierekúshtchina, her faithful lady's maid: "What should we do with an old ikon when its colours are faded?"

"We burn it."

"We throw it into the water," said the Empress.

But she does not lose all interest in her friend. Is he not well? Has he shirts enough? The housewife in her worries about every detail. But she asks him to return her portrait for the new favourite. He swears he will never let the portrait out of his sight: does she want the diamonds? here is the frame; and he sends back to her the stones plucked from their setting. Catherine gets angry, threatens him with imprisonment. What a jolly farce! He laughs at her threats; from her he will take, and that gladly, every sort of punishment. While he was an exile from his country, his health was delicate. Never was he in better condition than now, and so he will not go. It is to St. Petersburg that he wishes to return. The Empress, quite worn out with argument, ceases opposing his wish any longer: let him come back! She will give him the title of Prince,

provided that he consents to pay his court to the favourite.

All these men tire her so! And what a round of futile days and weeks she lives through when now war breaks out again on the Danube! She is weary of her whole circle of attendants, she is in need of a fillip to her drooping spirits, is our changeable Catherine. She would like to see Potemkin again; he is the only man that knows how to keep her amused and interested. If only the mad jackanapes will not run too great risks beneath the walls of Silistria, or go out of his way to meet the many dangers that prowl about him! Should he come by his death, she would be inconsolable. Catherine is more accessible than that impregnable citadel; her siege is already an accomplished fact. Without a moment's delay she writes to him that she is anxious to save the lives of those zealous and brave men who are fighting in her service, and then adds a postscript which comprehends the whole gist of her thoughts: "I am still very well-disposed towards you."

To this invitation Potemkin, with his heart on fire, replies with this lovely letter. He was a man of tender feeling, and a poet:

"No sooner did I see you, than I ceased to think of any one but you; your charming eyes captivated me and I trembled with eagerness

to avow my love. From every heart, independently of rank or fortune, Love demands submission to his will, and 'tis with the same flowers that he forges his unbreakable chain. But, O God! what torment to love one to whom I dare not speak my passion! One who can never be mine! Barbarous and cruel vault of heaven, why didst thou make her so beautiful? Or why didst exalt her to such greatness? Why decree that it must be she, and she alone, whom I could find it in my heart to love? She alone, whose hallowed name is never to pass the gate of my lips, whose charming image will never fade from my heart."

He loves her, he amuses her, she admires him; and at the last she finds a collaborator. Vassiltchikoff has only to give up his keys, his chessboard and his house. Along with a written pass signifying his right to leave his prison, she gave him a hundred thousand roubles, seven thousand serfs, diamonds to the value of sixty thousand roubles, with fifty thousand roubles' worth of silverware, and a yearly pension of twenty thousand roubles. It was but a temporary connection, a passing fancy!

"The footing on which Potemkin stands is very different from that on which I stood," writes this young man on the occasion of his being thus politely bowed out; "I was but as it were a kept girl. They treated me like one.

They wanted me to see nobody, and I was not allowed to go out. Whenever I asked for anything I got no reply whatever. And when I thought I should like the ribbon of St. Ann, I spoke to the Empress about it: next day I found bills to the value of thirty thousand roubles in my pocket. My mouth was always closed in this fashion and I was sent back to my quarters. As for Potemkin, he gets what he wants. He dictates his wishes. He is the Master."

He is the master, in very fact. Catherine is crazy over him. They are made for one another, since they are not at all like one another. Orloff, meeting him one day on the marble stairway, asks him the news: "What are they talking about at Court?" — "Oh, nothing much, except that you are going down and I am going up."

She cannot get along without her Cyclops, as she calls him on account of the loss of his eye; she settles him in a suite in the Palace; initiates him in all her State-affairs. He is for ever surprising her by his laziness or by his industry. Does she think him plunged in work? For whole days at a time he does nothing but muse and dream, leaving his dispatches unopened. Must he go on a journey? For six whole months his post-chaise has been standing at the door awaiting his pleasure. He shuffles

about, his bare feet in Turkish slippers, his hair unkempt, his person dirty and untidy to a degree, and gnawing at his finger-nails.

The Empress gets angry; he kisses her, wheedles her: "My dove, I was thinking of you." — "Gregor Alexandrovitch, do you not mean to tidy yourself up?" She was powerless to resist him, however, because there was in him a force, a mighty fund of energy that beat down all her will to oppose. He was a thunderstorm, a cyclone of personality, and at the same time he had a charm that soothed and fondled with its tenderness, and his voice was musical and soft:

"Come, Catherine, I want you."

"But the Prince of Prussia is waiting for me."

"He'll wait."

"The Ambassadors?"

"They are in no hurry."

"And the Court? And Diderot?"

"They don't matter! I wish to hold all Russia twined within my arms to-night.

The Empress has slipped out of his embrace: "My little lord, you have nothing stamped on your heart but Catherine," and she steals away.

What a strange personage was this madman, who at times is seen striding along the public highways eating raw onions, cloves of garlic and rye bread, and who at other times

stuffs himself to repletion with pineapples and caviar, according as he turns towards Asia or towards Europe!

✣

Into the sun-lit monastery-cell pigeons blue and pink and mauve have made their way with heavy flight. They place their coral feet on the deal-board shake-down on which Catherine lies asleep; they hunt for crumbs and pickings and gurgle forth their throaty coo-ings, language of their love. The Empress awakes with a start in the midst of these brazen marauders. What are these whitewashed walls? Her sleep-dulled memory stretches itself to action and brings her back with one waft of its wing to Troïtza, the hallowed convent whither her last evening's journey had taken her.

She is no bigot, far from it; but in order to please her people's susceptibilities she must go offer up her prayers and take a present to St. Sergius. This is a chasuble which with her own hands she has embroidered, pearl by pearl, and which now lies spread out in sumptuous display over a straw-bottomed chair. A scarlet geranium flaunts its flaming blooms in the window, and seems to push further into the background the Byzantine cupolas of the twelve churches that rise around the sacred en-

closure, surmounted each by its spinach roof in the Moscow manner.

Sweet awakening blended with the low soft murmuring of heaven's own birds! A petty friar enters without rapping. He balances a platter heaped with a pyramid of yellow-frosted cakes studded with anise-seed and filled with pistachio preserve. Where are his wings? For he is an archangel, with his fair and silky curls falling in gentle waves upon his youthful shoulders. What a pretty cherub 'tis! His nose is of the upturned order, and his whole person is wrapped about with an air of ingenuous candour that is enchanting. If she but dared. . . But she dares not. He has lowered his eyes; look at the hypocrite! Catherine's complexion has the sheen and freshness of mother-of-pearl as she lies there in the morning's misty damp, which a lukewarm ray has already begun to pierce. During her sleep her kerchief has fallen; her skin gleams like satin under its drops of moisture. And see how her pretty foot flirts and shivers there on the damp flagstone. If she but dared. . . The little fledgeling-monk blushes, and kisses the highly-arched instep. The pigeons take alarm and fly away.

Her desire calls for Potemkin. Where has he gone galivanting so early in the morning? Why has he not come to greet us at our early

levée? Is he still asleep in his narrow cell? No, the door of his cell is open. Catherine goes down to hunt for him. She goes from church to church, in each of which the matin hymns are rising like the vapour from the dew. A touch of the joy that is not other-worldly has found its way into the monastery. From the Father Superior, the Abbot, to the lay brothers, who go by in their white surplices, and to the sacristans raised high in air by their jangling, swinging bells, the whole convent, distracted by the Imperial visit, says its prayers but reluctantly and sighs after Catherine.

In the kitchen-garden of the brotherhood, where amidst a riot of flowers there grows a crowding press of cabbages and cucumbers, a number of monks are coming eagerly forward. Who is yon holy old man whose eyes are streaming with tears? He weeps without respite over the sins of the world; two deep furrows have dug their way down his hollow cheeks. The black cowl falls over his reddened eye-sockets, and a flowing beard, grey with the dust of the weary roads, twines itself about his gnarled and knotty stick. It is the *starets*,[1] the anchorite, the holy man of the forests, the solitary hermit. He has come from afar to hold speech with Catherine.

"Is this thou, great Empress, that dost

[1] Old man.

live in concubinage, when thou couldst, surrounded by a chorus of praise, have thy guilty union blest upon the altar steps? What an example thou givest thy people! Forget not, woman, that thou wilt one day answer for thine acts! Thou art widowed, thou art free: who doth prevent thee from tying those fleshly bonds in the presence of God? "

Potemkin pushes the ascetic aside, and drives the monks backwards. He has thrown aside his haughty, rakish three-cornered hat and his sword and donned the fustian which suits his grave cast of features so well. He falls at Her Majesty's feet:

" Mother, I love you, but bear with me, I am choked with scruples, my heart overflows with remorse; I do not wish to live any longer in a state of sin. If I am not worthy to be your husband, leave me, and I shall consecrate my life to the Lord. In days gone by I believed myself ambitious, I set my desire on being a minister of the State or else a mitred archbishop, on commanding soldiers or else priests; to-day, since your will is thus, sunk in the depths of my humility, I shall be the obscure servant of God. I shall turn monk."

Is it a cleverly plotted comedy? Catherine has no doubt of it, and admires the masterhand of the author. Potemkin loves the sim-

plicity of soul of these religious fanatics, their slavonic hymns, their joyous *kyries,* their anointed and perfumed hands; and he has gained an incredible degree of influence over them in consequence. What discussions, what controversies he has had with the Abbot Superior! Our theologian can show his confessor a few points. At the refectory he drinks *kvas* and greedily devours gruel soaked in rich grease, all the while juggling familiarly with the Holy Ghost, whom he makes out to be descended, — O scandalous utterance! — sometimes from the Father and sometimes from the Son, and without being afraid of burning his fingers.

When he renounces the sinful pleasures of here-below, he is not sincere. But, scarcely have the words escaped his lips, than sincerity is forced upon him; for every Slav possesses the prodigious power of inventing his blathering utterances at a moment's notice, and of believing what he says, immediately he strings the words together. Such magic is there in the power of persuasion, in the Oriental brand of politeness, which frees the memory of all restraint, and banishes the high-sounding elements of speech beyond the pale of time's jurisdiction.

The garden gives forth the odour of incense and roses. Potemkin, sensual and thick-lipped,

is revelling in the freshness of the morning-prime.

"I understand your condition of soul Gregory, son of Alexander," replies the Empress. "Your decision is irrevocable, I know. It breaks my heart, but you must listen to the voices that call you. I shall not offer any impediment to your call, I shall give you to God."

"Thank you, Little Mother, thank you. Brothers, open your holy cells, gather to your fold a man long strayed from the path. Give him the refuge and peace for which his soul is sore anhungered. I shall no more leave this monastery, for here, while still in life, I shall dig myself a tomb. Here I shall seek rest and forgetfulness."

"Obey your conscience. You were ambitious. The madness of it! What is ambition? A good that betrays its user. Bless Heaven for having torn it from your grasp. When I shall be tired of loving, when my responsibilities crush my shoulders beneath their weight, I shall think of you in your peaceful seclusion that is of God, and I shall envy you, Gregor Alexandrovitch. Farewell. . . ."

Potemkin, dumbfounded, remained for several months in the monastery of Troïtza. Catherine had many a quiet laugh over this forced retreat: how her turbulent lover must

be pawing the ground in his wooden stall! He had been duped by the wily Empress. Time passed. No message from the city; silence closed about him. Already his reign as her gallant was to be conjugated in the past tense. Too intelligent a mind to resign himself to his misfortune, he started to devise means whereby he might turn it to some account. From cenobite he turned pimp, just as he was general and minister, just as he would have turned bishop at the call of need.

When Madame de Pompadour began to perceive that her charms were leaving Louis XV indifferent, she had recourse to stratagem in order to re-awaken the surfeited desires of the monarch. She had François Boucher paint a Holy Family destined for the oratory of the pious Maria Leczinska. The dainty Morfil, an Irish colleen, played the part of decoy in the mistress' well-laid plans. The pretty model's exquisitely rounded throat was just the thing to tempt the most jaded of kings. The brunette under the guise of the Virgin fondled the Well-Beloved. In this way the ingenious Marquise smuggled the enticing maiden into the Royal Park, of which she kept the key. Potemkin was inspired to proceed along the same lines. Through a cousin of his, whose gratitude he could count on, he succeeded in keeping a guiding hand on Catherine's caprices.

He had the choosing and assigning of her lovers, brought about the killing off, in deliberately planned duels, of those who did not suit him, and varied his favours according as he handed out aphrodisiacs or poisons.

As compared with Louis, Catherine is never surfeited or stale. What a nature is hers! What green freshness of vigour! What an endowment of springtime's resistless urge! Even when thoroughly tired by amorous excesses she has no need of a stimulant. While the Pompadours and the du Barrys tickle the senses of the corrupt king and rack their brains to provide distractions for a mind oppressed with the boredom of Versailles, Catherine, on the other hand, finds amusement in everything about her. A new favourite comes to share her bed, — she is in the best of spirits; another takes this one's place, — what a piece of luck, what a treat! Her body's appetite is insatiable. "She's Etna in eruption," says Grimm; but she is a good-humoured volcano, for she showers upon her zealous servitors a plentiful rain of decorations.

With the single exception of Potemkin, all of her lovers, dark or fair, adolescent ephebe or sophisticated gallant, are as radiant of beauty as gods stepped down off their pedestals. "People credit me with fickleness; it is beauty alone that attracts me," she writes. The teas-

ing sprite of a Voltaire admits this readily, but is of the opinion that the name of Catherine, his goddess, is a rather poor match for all the heroes by whom she is surrounded. He would like to change her baptismal title. — " You were not made for the calendar. Juno, Minerva, or Venus are more in keeping with the poetic muse." — " I shall certainly not change my name for that of the envious Juno, I will have nothing whatever to do with the name of Venus; there is far too much laid to the account of the beauteous dame last-mentioned."

But never fear: if Venus has certain backbiting enemies who throne it in the clouds between a handful of strayed and jealous swans, there is more of clamorous babble and chatter over the Semiramis of the North, so obliging, so serviceable, so generous, and not so much attached to her prey as she is under the thralldom of a sensuality that grips her with a strangle-hold.

This sensual desire of hers is as versatile as that of Louis XV, the last monarch who dared, as she did, to live his life out unfettered by cramping conventions. Backed by the absolute power which was their basic principle, and furthered and countenanced by the prevailing manners of a century that specialized in the cult of the softer feelings and of gallantry, these sovereigns, despite many differences in

character, resemble each other in more than one feature. In his younger days, Louis indulges in a frolic with the Mailly-Nesles sisters: Catherine takes her delight with the Orloff brothers. Neither keeps any reckoning of the illegitimate children. Later on come the reigns of Pompadour, minister in petticoat, and of Potemkin, general in dressing-gown. The cast-off Marchioness gives a house-warming in her cottage hidden in the sequestered groves about Versailles: the Prince, turned procurer and confidential adviser, places his protégés in their lucrative situations at Tsarskoë-Selo. Into Louis' "Stag-Park" no hinds were allowed entrance but those that had been tamed and taught their tricks, and all the fashionable world, both French and Russian, wore the head-dress decorated with horns.

XI

APHRODISIACS

CATHERINE abhors a vacuum just as does Nature, whose counsels she follows to the letter. And nature shows herself a very exacting taskmistress. For while Orloff, the old-time rake, has taken up housekeeping with the dainty cousin of whom he has become enamoured, and while Potemkin is no longer anything but a trusty adviser on matters Cytherean, the Empress, now well past her prime, must strive to dispel the gloomy forebodings that throng in upon her by seeking, from amidst the youthful faces placed within her reach, the elusive shape of Pleasure.

In this renewal of springtime activity, like some queen bee she makes store of honey and turns gluttonous to devour it. But who says she is growing old, when she so marvellously preserves the illusion of youth that she even deceives herself? Thus in the forest you may see oaks hoary with eld, whose gnarled and twisted roots rise high out of the soil, and yet, at spring's return, they shown green on

their topmost boughs, in tufts and clusters here and there; raise your eyes towards these waving plumes, and the breeze, you will observe, comes sighing through leaves more tender-soft than the foliage of nursling trees.

Zavadovski the theatre-prompter, Zoritch the Croatian, Korsakoff the tenor, the sensitive Lanskoï, Arkharoff the police spy, Yermoloff the half-negro, Mamonoff and Zuboff follow one another, with the April of their youth as gift-offering. A chance incident raises them to distinction, a caprice then discards them like lemons squeezed dry by expert hands. The crystallisation process takes place as if by enchantment and the crystals dissolve more quickly than snow on a red-hot shovel.

Each time, Catherine brings along her stock of hopes, her fund of light-heartedness. No sooner is her greedy passion satiated, than she bundles these hopes, this bright vivacity, like the worn-out old clothes they are, into her pack again and carries them off to dye them elsewhere. A pair of lips a trifle redder than the average, a jet-black eye, a dull, creamy skin are sufficient to fan the flames of her desire that is ever on the alert. The magnetic current once interrupted, let us change accumulators, is Catherine's notion: "Yesterday I loved him, to-day I no longer love him." But always she believes herself beloved.

Are not illusions permitted to such women as never go out but in a carriage, and whose palaces are prisons of jasper, silver and malachite, and whom no one dares approach save with a compliment on his lips and the incense-cup of flattery beneath his arm? Catherine is not a woman who loves with fixed constancy, but a woman in love with love. She is not intellectual, nor is she sensitive to art. Although her taste is but little refined, she buys pictures, books, prints, cameos, whole collections of them, with an incredible degree of enthusiasm, and struts about in the midst of her vast riches like a sea-captain who is lord of the waves and looks at them without ever seeing them. Artists, for her, are but tools, philosophers so many newspapers, her lovers a means of distraction. She wields the hand of mastery over everything within her reach, for the reason that she is attached to nothing except the great undeveloped and neglected country to whose State-documents she affixes her name.

Take a look at her portraits; what accessories meet the eye! Cupid, in a posture of alarm, is seen lifting the curtain; a boat passes across the background and blends with the skyline; on her sceptre is screwed the Orloff diamond, larger than an apple, heavier than a remorse. Her mouth in a fixed pucker, she leads a people of slaves and bespatters posterity with

the noisy splash of victories won by her lovers, generals whose field tent is a bed-recess, who rarely go through any other fire than hers, and who nevertheless, by a miracle still unexplained, seize provinces by force of arms and cast them at her feet like floral offerings.

Wherein is her genius? Why is her name so rich in play of glistening colour? Why, while still alive, is she immortalized? Prince Henry of Prussia, jealous of this provincial who has turned out too well, declares that anywhere else she would blaze with lesser splendour, even though she has more of mental endowment than her circle of attendants. — "On such a throne one wins fame at a bargain." When Russia is brought low, whoever has the steering of her is of necessity great.

Catherine, sly fox that she is, does not forget the trumpets that play the accompaniment to the piping song of renown. With gifts of watches and such-like trinkets and gewgaws she buys the good will of the philosophers, and since she has but little sympathy for France, she yields her applause to whatever literary works traduce the latter country. Diderot lies in the dungeon of Vincennes, say you? She takes a lively interest in his fate. Is he refused admission into the Academy? She has him praised with a long list of complimentary references, purchases his library, and invites

him to St. Petersburg. Scarcely has he arrived when she expresses more surprise at his black garb than at his unflinching spirit, and starts to complain of his familiarities: he strokes her affectionately on the arms, shakes her by both hands, and strums on the table. Of his honest and sensitive soul she says not a word. But Diderot, enraptured, comes away from the audience exclaiming: "Yes, I have seen her, I have heard her, she has no idea of all the good she has done me. What a Queen! what an astounding woman!" And in his frenzy of enthusiasm he starts to take liberties with the servant girl, kissing her on the neck as he goes out.

It is at about this period that Potemkin discovered Lanskoï, the handsome but rather frail young man of whom he made Catherine a present. The new lover was twenty-two years of age, and possessed five shirts and a recipe for cocktails with a base of Tokay and a sprinkling of rum and pineapple juce. The invention was a good one, but he made indiscreet use of it. What is to become of a fellow who can scarcely read, write, or mumble a few words of broken French, and whose mistress, an Empress, has decided, in her wisdom, to turn a simple cornet of horse into an art amateur?

Here we see Lanskoï on all-fours, his head

buried in a mass of straw, pulling out from a huge packing-case the masterpieces long awaited from Paris. The heavy wrapping-paper lay spread in long sheets all over the arm-chairs. Catherine was having as much fun as a child might. Propped against the easel was a Virgin by Guido, with large thick hands; on a chair, a false Rembrandt entitled "Samuel being presented at the Temple," which made her almost swoon with delight. What is this canvas that is so precious, to judge by the plethora of rags with which it is wrapped? Catherine comes closer: it is a bathing-girl by Lemoine. Little recks she of the golden-brown colour-scheme, the rare and delicate tones; she has taken Lanskoï by the hand, and is gazing at his finely-turned legs, the genteel curves of his waist and hips, and his face whereon a forced pretense at voluptuousness has set a smile. Without the slightest deference to a Claude Lorrain, which shows the sun reclining to rest upon the hill of the artist's dreams, she breaks into a hysterical laugh and drags the distressed Lanskoï off with her to where the curtain falls behind them.

Feeling his vigour faint and leave him at the very moment when he is asked to display it manfully, he is smitten with consternation. Is it shyness that makes him so hesitating, or else is Her Majesty at fault in the way she offers

herself to his devoted service? How is this fit of weak exhaustion to be explained? The blown-out candles in those sconces may be the cause of it. The secret alcove is so dingy-dark. The poor fellow is a visualist, and would give anything for the modest glimmer of a single candle flickering on a group of smiling dimples. In the privacy of his own heart he lays the blame on his bloated companion, and, if only he could have dared, he would have ordered the lash to teach this Empress the art of rousing men. Orloff, that wretched numskull, had taught her nothing, then? Had she been lying at a greater slope, had she kept herself somewhat more turned away from him, had she been less importunately eager, she would have got the better of his indolent tardiness. Never had such an experience come her way before, never surely had any woman undergone the humiliation inflicted upon her who rules over twenty millions of men.

He suddenly gets a glimpse of the possible consequences of this indifference. What despair! What shame! Tears gush from his eyes, quickly dissembled. How he detests her, the horrid old vortex of passion she is! Will it be not just like her to make game of him for this inattention of his? It will be better for him to run away and carry his despair far beyond the reach of the banter and chaff of

those scoundrels of the Court whose stinging jokes and quibbles are already sounding in his ears.

Catherine, though, on her part, is in a transport of delight at this extreme shyness, which she takes to be the index of a heart weighted down with its load of emotions. "How he loves her." Her impatience is held within bounds, her ardour will be only the more tumultuous for it. She is mad with passion and derives an extravagant degree of gratification from her mania. A single continuous shudder shakes her generous flanks. It is not her custom to help her neighbour: youth, artless and unadorned, has to make up for the lack of imagination.

Time was passing. Reflecting that as yet he had had his fingers on only some seven million roubles, and that he was merely a general and a chamberlain, Lanskoï was seized with the fear of seeing his hopes of fortune vanish into air at the door of the seraglio. He called to mind that the doctor with a meaning smile had left a powder of cantharides within reach of his hand. He swallowed the aphrodisiac in little gulps until a growing flame crackled and sparkled within him and hurried him towards the impatient female who was only awaiting his good pleasure.

✣

The rumour had gone the rounds that the young Princess Orloff had died of consumption on the shores of the Lake of Geneva, and that Gregor was wandering about overcome with despair; it was even reported that his reason was tottering. Catherine, absorbed in her passion, refused to believe it; for the rest, it was of little moment to her, since she now imagined herself to be in love for the first time, and lived only for a smile from Lanskoï.

How sweet it is to feel the arm of her youthful lover pressed against her old heart! Like the subdued and contented paramour she is, and with a somewhat motherly air, fetching deep sighs the while, she lays her blotchy cheek against the youth's pink roses. To fully enjoy the pleasure of admiring the handsome and stylish appearance of Lanskoï in his blue coat embroidered with silver, she has ordered an orchestra of fifty violins.

Suddenly the music stops with a clash of discords. Who is this man in deep mourning that advances up the room, so pale, with his hair in disorder, a key, the sign of his chamberlain's rank, hanging down in front of him, the badges of his various orders striking one against the other at his back with a noise of old iron, St. Andrew and St. Vladimir hanging upside down; who is this comical and yet terrible figure?

"Well, well, Katinka, you still have, I notice, a taste for dancing. Will you do me the honour of taking a few turns with me? Perhaps my black suit frightens you. Are you not aware that my wife is dead? How is it you have dared to give a ball when she is scarcely buried?" His eyes wander about with a lost and faraway look, and the poor madman bursts into laughter. Lanskoï is ready to hurl himself at him, but Catherine restrains him, trembling visibly.

"I loved her, Katinka; and now my happiness is gone." He bursts into sobs upon her shoulder, and then, fixing Lanskoï with a stare: "Ah! here's the new one! You are very young, Sir. How is it you allowed yourself to be caught in the snare, poor little giddy starling?"

Lanskoï, wrought to the pitch of exasperation, threatens to put him out: — "One step more, and I shall throw you through the window."

"Orloff, Orloff," cries Catherine in a burst of tears. "Leave him alone, he has lost his reason."

"Yes, I am mad," says the colossus with a bitter laugh. "And who has driven me mad? You, Katinka. For love of you, what have I not done! And now you say that I am

crazy." The Empress signs to her attendants to lead away the poor demented creature, who dies in a few days in an attack of acute delirium.

Lanskoï the well-beloved kept growing more and more dear to her heart. She pampered him, fondled him, doted upon him, and for the bliss of joining her lips to his she would neglect everything else. She had no eyes for anything henceforth but the tender lover with the face of a girl. The Court, surprised beyond measure, prated and gossiped over this scandalous fidelity.

Alas! Lanskoï's health, weakened by the constant use of drugs, could not withstand the inroads of an attack of scarlet fever. Catherine, refusing to credit either the diagnosis or the physicians who made them, laughed to scorn the long list of prescriptions and orders. The patient shared her skepticism, and poked fun at the German expert, Dr. Weickhardt, fetched hastily from St. Petersburg; openly turning to ridicule the poor man's hunchback and his ugly red nose. Catherine encouraged her lover in these impertinences. But then, seeing how livid and purple Lanskoï's cheeks had become, she anxiously questions the learned specialist; whereupon he replies without beating about the bush:

"A malignant type of the disease, your Majesty; he will not recover."

"Hold your tongue, you magpie! you do not know the strength of his constitution," retorts Catherine, all unhinged by her agitation; "save him! I know well that you will pull him through."

His disease being contagious, the Court physician is insistent with his plea that Her Majesty leave the sick room.

Catherine refuses. Seated on the bed, for the space of ten long days she struggles to snatch her darling from the grasp of death. Could it really be that so much of youth, so much of beauty must fade away into nothingness when she was still full of passionate yearnings for it! How beautiful Lanskoï is! His sufferings make his eyes seem larger, his cheek-bones are flushed and blotched by the fever as though with rouge, his parched mouth sags open, he stretches out his arms. Is it to Catherine? Is it to Death? Death wins and bears him off. The Empress is inconsolable.

Everything bores and wearies her. She can neither sleep, nor eat, nor write; never has she been so sunk in unhappiness. Will she live through it? All business of State is suspended.

Potemkin, filled with uneasiness, surrounds her with every mark of his devotion, but she remains unmoved. Was it her heart that suffered thus, or was it the tortured cry of sense-memory?

XII

THE COMET

IN the cemetery of Tsarskoë-Selo, Lanskoï, forgotten, was rotting without even one flower to mark his place. The obliging Potemkin, who was really fond of Catherine in his own peculiar way, fearing lest a prolonged abstinence might change her humour for the worse, unearthed a vague sort of cousin named Count Dmitri Mamonoff, who needed no encouragement to answer the Empress' turn and advance his own fortunes. After the first interview she said to the donor: " The drawing is good, but the colouring is not worth a great deal." On second thoughts, though, she bought the drawing, and next day the charming aristocrat, brought up by the Jesuits, awoke to find himself, by the hazard of fortune, aide-de-camp to Her Majesty. To shew his gratitude, he sent to Potemkin a teapot of solid gold with the following device: " More united by the heart than by the ties of blood."

After the New Year festivities, the Empress finding her usual bright spirits restored, and

her loving proclivities once more in full swing, decided to take a stroll around her little household, as she was in the habit of proudly terming the Empire. Let there be brought in rich profusion silks, and furs, and marvellous products of the loom, embroidered, embossed, gleaming and flashing with wondrous lights, to dazzle the almond-eyed Asiatics!

Potemkin has gone on ahead of the Royal party as scout and paver of the way. Mason, Marshal and gardener rolled into one, this marvellous conjurer builds cities, erects triumphal arches, constructs whole fleets, and designs enchanted parks that will break forth into masses of flowers beneath Catherine's tread. What a journey! What a retinue! Fourteen carriages, a hundred and sixty-four sledges, and five hundred and sixty horses that paw the ground impatiently at each relay! And what biting cold! there are seventeen degrees of frost.

Her Majesty's carriage is a luxurious apartment on wheels, with drawing-room, card-tables, and library. Mlle Protassoff, ugly, absurdly vain, and as dark as a queen of Tahiti, takes her place in it along with Count Mamonoff, and the two keep up a constant bickering.

Narushkin, Cobentzel, Fitz-Herbert, Ségur, buffoons and diplomatists come in to play at

riddles, charades and rhyming-lines. Without feeling for the muses or for harmony, Catherine would keep hunting for some rhyme that could not be found. The flatterers would then exclaim in chorus: " Resign yourself, Madame, to make your laws and your conquests in prose."

" You are right, I was not born a poet. What do you think I should have been if I had been born a man and a private citizen? " The Englishman replied: " A deeply-learned framer of laws." The Austrian: " A great minister." The Frenchman: " A famous general."

" Ah! this time you are mistaken; I know myself, I am hot-headed; I should have risked everything for glory, and while still no more than an obscure sub-lieutenant, in my very first compaign I should have had my head knocked off."

The lazy winter sun rose hardly sooner than midday, and went warily into eclipse after luncheon. But they had no need of the light of day: whole firs and beeches burnt like huge torches on both sides of the road over the frozen steppe, and shed a light more brilliant than that of the sun. The versts kept fleeting by, and suddenly Kiev stretched forth its gilded cupolas.

The winter snows melted like a sherbet in a

ballroom, and the Borysthenes bore the checkered and dappled galleys swiftly down its tides to new conquests. Egged on by curiosity the native populaces kept flocking to meet the royal travellers. What a medley of strangely assorted garbs! See the furred caps of the Mongols, the high-peaked turbans of the Lesghis, the embroidered flat bonnets of the Tatars, the white *burkas* [1] of the Princes of the Caucasus, as they bend low before their Sovereign who, with lavish munificence, throws ribbons and pearls among them.

The majestic flotilla follows the Borysthenes downstream to meet the waiting kings: "Even though it be difficult to believe, Catherine is a sovereign much more entitled to a place in history than she is one fitted to be the heroine of a novel," remarked the Prince de Ligne, the celebrated jockey turned diplomat, who had joined the illustrious voyagers.

King Stanislas was awaiting Catherine at the frontiers of the kingdom which she had given him, and which she was going to take back from him. Surrounded by squadrons of Polish cavalry wearing velvet uniforms, and with plumed helmets, he came to solicit the vacillating protection of his forgetful mistress. The artillery of the fleet thundered notice of his approach. He climbed into a longboat to the

[1] Felt-cloaks.

accompaniment of heavenly music, and came alongside the Imperial galley. The noble guests and the officials gather in a ring to receive him: " Gentlemen," he says as he stands at the salute, " the King of Poland has charged me to recommend to you Count Poniatowski."

Catherine, majestic, condescending, offers this old lover her hand to kiss. What a chilly proceeding! Was this Stanislas, this sad-featured Sire who looked for all the world like a plucked crow? How greatly he had changed in the past thirty years! A weary attempt at a smile temporarily hid the fixed frown that usually sat like a grimace upon the morose features of the cavalier. Disillusion and disappointment had worn a deep furrow in the face of this man with whom she had thought she was in love all her life through. She could scarcely recognise her lover of bygone days. Was this he in whom her desire had sounded the depths of delight? Of all that happy memory was this shadow standing there all that remained? Where was the vaulted arch, the corners of which were the particularly chosen spots where she used to bite him, that mouth like the pulp of some succulent fruit, and that used to put her in mind of the red-ripe cherries of Oranienbaum? Whither had that roguish and sly look of his eye flown away to hide? For now in their black-brown depths

she failed to find that tinge of violet which in the olden days used to take on a deeper shade when he was roused to passion. Where was it? Vanished, disappeared. His majestic stature, tall and straight, was now bowed, and even the sound of his voice, that used to reach the innermost recesses of her soul, was now cracked and unmusical. How horrible was old age! But Catherine did not see her own, forgotten anew each evening. On the conclusion of the *tête-à-tête*, which did not last any length of time, their Majesties rejoined their inquisitive courtiers. The Empress was embarrassed, and the King affected a smile.

At the banquet they conversed but little, and ate sparingly, since without appetite, of the *sterlets*[2] of the Volga, the veal of Archangel, the fruits of Astrakhan, ices, and preserves; while they drank, with a strange lack of good cheer, to the health of the King in the wine of Constance. To bridge the gaps of silence, which Catherine could never abide, the orchestra played soft interludes. The King of Poland was on Her Majesty's right, with Potemkin opposite him; Mamonoff, at the foot of the table, was in the throes of a sudden fit of jealousy, and pouted like a child, his nose stuck in his plate. Thus had chance brought together on this galley three of

[2] Sturgeon.

Catherine's lovers, representing her youth, her prime, her decline. Since the one chased the other down the halls of her memory, she was scarcely surprised to see them gathered together about her. This astounding woman did not make a practice of classifying her recollections; she went her way through life like a river that keeps sliding onwards in its bed without tarrying at the banks it kisses on its course.

In the faraway perspective through which she viewed Stanislas, he had become more strange than a stranger. He who returns from the past is as a dead man, since there is nothing living of that which we used to love in him. Were we to turn our head away, he would notice the strange woman we are, one indeed we ourselves should not recognise either. Our own wrinkles are shown up to us on his bald forehead, at the circumference of his disillusioned mouth.

As they rose from the table, the King took from a page the Empress' gloves and fan, and presented them to Her Majesty; and when he started looking for his hat, the Empress handed it over to him. " Ah! Madame, you once in days gone by gave me a much more handsome one than this "; and he went his way back to Kanieff muttering: " A sorry part to play is mine! Happy are those who are dead! "

In the evening there were fireworks: a hundred thousand large rockets made the hillside a mass of flame. At the ball given by the King, Catherine did not put in her appearance at all, wishing to devote herself entirely to her young lover, who was making a whole series of scenes with his jealous tantrums, like the comedy-player he was.

The legendary voyage pursued its course across the Tatar deserts where the long caravans of haughty dromedaries kept going by. At Batché Serai Catherine awoke, in a kiosk of gold beneath a clear blue sky, to the chanting of muezzins and dervishes. Fountain-jets of water, chattering and babbling as loudly as these human voices, splashed over marble basins and spread their grateful moisture over laurel trees and jasmins.

Potemkin is amused at her surprise. This morning he has put on his grey silk coat, apple-green breeches and yellow morocco-leather boots. On his head he has carelessly stuck a straw hat, around which is twisted a sky-blue ribbon, the whole giving him the air of a Watteau shepherd. But this old gallant is never ridiculous, for originality is second nature to him. He escorts the Emperor Joseph, who had joined the Empress to partition the rest of Poland between a game of whist and a sailing-excursion on the roadstead-waters.

What an apotheosis! In the middle of an olive grove a streamer flutters to the breeze with this inscription: "This way to Byzantium." Beneath a canopy of flounces and filmy gauze sits Catherine; and to her Potemkin sends this letter written by his own hand:

"I pray you, Little Mother, to look upon this spot as a place where your glory is your own personal possession, and where you do not share it with your predecessors. Here you are not walking in the footsteps of another. I kiss your hands. Your most faithful slave

"PRINCE POTEMKIN"

Catherine, who had seen cities upon cities rise up out of the earth to greet her, and had left her Black Sea fleet with all sails spread, was now coming home by short stages, radiant over a triumph that struck Europe with astonishment. At each relay she wrote to Potemkin, "my golden pheasant," "my pigeon," "my bow-wow"; addressing him in all the terms of love's menagerie, the threadbare words serving her still once more to express her gratitude.

After sixteen hundred leagues of constant jolting, this marvellous woman was her unwearied self; as for Mamonoff, he was worn out and suffering from a severe backache: nothing is so exhausting as love-making against

the grain. He was disgusted with the ignominy of the abject slavishness in which he was forced to flounder, and so, at the first smile, at the first curtsy of Mlle Tcherbatoff, who greeted the returned travellers on the palace-steps with a wreath of pretty blushes, he fell head over heels in love with the maid-of-honour.

" The traitor! " exclaimed Catherine. " My fine gentleman pretended he was ill, kept away from me, and I, like a fool, was very worried over him. Potemkin was quite right in saying to me: ' Little Mother, spit upon him.' I was blind, I could not believe in such impertinence. To rob me of my love under my very nose! The ungrateful wretch has deceived me and I have not even the satisfaction of paying him back in his own coin, since my adventures are public property and since, alas, I cannot love two men at one and the same time. Shrapowicki, see that the fools are married off immediately and get out of my sight for all time! "

From this period on, her infatuations follow each other in more and more rapid succession. Two weeks afterwards, she writes to Grimm, her lay confessor: " I have come back to life like a fly that the cold had benumbed." Who is warming her up once more before she is benumbed for good and all? It is Plato Zuboff,

a short dark youth, a practised jilt, and of a pliant and wiry build. His twenty-two-year-old vigour is destined to overthrow the sixty-year-old Empress. In spite of the quips and squibs of which his name is the butt, this little despot has nothing platonic about him. Catherine loves him with the frenzied transport which we bring to our last fleeting pleasures.

The first frosts of autumn had stiffened the leaves of Tsarskoë-Selo, and covered the lawns with a white sugar-coating of dew that was strung from blade to blade by threads of gossamer. Leaning on her cane, Catherine was taking a walk with no other escort than her servant Maria Sawishna and her dogs that frisked about near her, and kept fetching the fallen chestnuts in their pink jaws. The trees had grown faster than her grandchildren, and were already tall enough to cast their shade over the old Empress, long since a grandmother.

Feeling heavy and tired, the two women paused in their walk and sank down on a bench from which they could admire the unexpected windings of the park laid out in the English style, which had roused the spleen of many a gardener devoted to flower-beds with borders. Stuck all over with little columns here and there, the park looked, as Catherine expressed it, like a game of nine-pins.

Every victory was signalized by a monument here; three greyhounds and their mates had their epitaphs in the enclosure. Over the brink of the waves Tchesmé lifted its beaked column in memory of Orloff; the battle of Kagul pointed its obelisk skyward in honour of Potemkin, not far from a mosque and a Chinese pagoda, the witnesses of the frolicsome antics of these gallants. Since the heroes commemorated were now all dead, the garden was but a cemetery. Catherine there saw nothing but her glory's reflection. She had only to open her toothless mouth, and her broken voice issued so slowly that the syllables seemed to go to sleep on her lips. The once happy face so often thrown into disorder by sobs and tears was now strangely hollowed; two deep furrows divided her once chubby cheeks. Her eyes were burnt out. A fold of ill-omen stretched full-length across her brow.

Chasing each other among the dead leaves, three husky young lads came along, spruce and trim and bubbling with mirth; the dogs yapped, and the uniformed youths, coming so close to the Empress that they might have touched her, passed on without saluting her. Maria Sawishna was highly indignant, and rose up in readiness to bring the rude boys to task. But the Empress put a restraining hand on her arm: "Leave them alone! no one wastes a

look at us any more; it is our fault, we have become old women. Ah! if an Empress could be always fifteen years old!" And she slowly climbed back up the slope that led to the palace.

In vain Catherine lavished her flattery and her petting on Zuboff; he carried on love-intrigues behind her back, just like all the rest; but not any more, perhaps, than the rest. She could boast, without taking any pride in it, that she was the most betrayed woman in all her empire. Her love for him brought her in touch with a roystering and licentious group of young people. Valerian Zuboff, Nicolas and Peter Soltykoff waged war on female chastity without discrimination. Any time they had to do with young women that were not to be bought, they would waylay them and carry them off, and after enjoying the first fruits of their innocence would shamelessly turn them over to the tender mercies of their valets. Although she did scold them a little, Catherine was wont to laugh at their escapades.

While she waited for these youthful rakes, she worked at embroidery in her boudoir studded with frail glass brackets each of which was encircled with rows of Wedgewood medallions. She kept one eye on the unfaithful lover's pet monkey, that took delight in teasing the tamed squirrel by pulling its tail, a rather

dangerous sport in the midst of the fragile Saxony and Sèvres pieces. Her imagination, still lively and brisk, kept romping about in tune with the mischievous antics of these creatures. South American parrots were flying and hopping about and whistling shrilly in a gilded cage, clothed in their plumage of blue, red, and yellow. This passionate collector of objects of beauty had just enough of heart to not be stirred to emotion by the past, and enough of memory to give life to all the miniatures of her lovers that were hung about her.

Every morning Zuboff the favourite opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by ministers, courtiers, petitioners. Does he like Turkish coffee? An elderly Ambassador prepares him a cup of it and serves it to the lazy fellow in his bed. The poet Dierzhavin compares him with Aristotle, the venerable servitors of the State kiss his shapely white hand. Catherine never tires of telling anyone who will listen to her that he is the greatest genius in all Russia. She has no will but his. And how generous and magnanimous he is, the young blackguard! He asks no favours of his kind and indulgent mistress. Is she eager to bestow lands upon him? He dares not accept them. His love is so disinterested! Only, in secret he demands and receives extravagant sums.

Should requests be not submitted to him

personally, they run the risk of falling into oblivion. The favourite's antichamber was as packed with clients as was that of Rasputin when curiosity took the writer to call on the confidant of the mystical and unfortunate wife of Nicolas II. Zuboff, like Rasputin, kept people waiting for hours for the favour of getting an audience; if the one made a practice of unsealing documents without ever reading them, the other could scarcely use a pen. Zuboff never gave a private hearing to anyone, which peculiarity was quite contrary to the custom of the wily peasant, who was in the habit of courting *tête-à-tête* interviews. The handsome young lord, grave as a pope in his rôle of grand vizier, used to have himself powdered right in the midst of a knot of courtiers, who dared make no vigorous protest, even when they got a generous sprinkle of the perfumed powder in their eyes.

Rasputin was more familiar and accessible, more "enterprising," and if his long hair, plastered down on his head, lacked elegance, at least he had nothing, in his modest suite of furnished rooms in the Gorokovaia, in the least like Zuboff's monkey. This beast was a most insufferable personage, who would come bounding into the dressing-room with the agility of a cat. The little epicure had a fondness for wigs that were made glossy with pomade. He

would leap from the chandelier or from the cornice on to the lowered head of some petitioner, and rummage about in the mass of artificial curls for his plunder, which he would then devour with great relish. What an honour to be thus singled out! Each day the courtiers kept raising the height of their wigs, in the hope of making the new master, Plato Zuboff, roar with laughter. The insolence of him! He scarcely took the trouble to say good-day to Paul, the hereditary Grand-Duke, who used to turn timidly away at sight of him.

✣

At Tsarskoë-Selo, the weather was turning damp. Catherine, feeling the cold more keenly than was her wont, ordered her carriage-and-eight and returned to St. Petersburg earlier than usual, and almost regretfully. As she drove along the docks lining the Neva, accompanied by her old friend Arkharoff, she suddenly became aware of a yellow streak of light that swept upwards with a rush from out the darkening evening sky across the silent and motionless masses of cloud. It was a comet. It sped swiftly in a straight line towards the Empress and sank its flaming hair into the river. "Alas!" exclaimed Catherine, "look, quick, there goes a warning sign from heaven, a sign I recognise. God sends such to the great

to warn them that they are approaching their end. Arkharoff, we have just seen the messenger of my death go by. We must bow to it." And she shivered in the wind that whistled around them.

With a sigh she drew her wadded fur coat about her shoulders, and since, in her optimistic way, she had sworn to Diderot that she would live for another twenty years at least, she shook off the fatal omen. But for all that, her companion heard her murmur: " I have been all my life a person who starts things she never finishes; I have trifled with laws and regulations; everything I have done has been by fits and starts, and I have carried nothing through to an end."

" Do not give way to anxiety, Madame, set aside these gloomy thoughts. In the past Your Majesty was not given to believing in portents and tokens."

" The days of old are no more, my friend. Today my strength fails me, my memory leaves me in the lurch, my life is at its ebb."

She who had honoured the throne by her vices, according to the phrase of an English orator, was about to take leave of the theatre of kings, where for the space of thirty-four years, without a single hour of faltering, she had played the leading part.

At this epoch of the cult of silhouettes,

when everyone followed the fad of carving on the wall his neighbour's profile, Lavater, the student of the mobile play of human features, declares that there is not beneath the moon a more imposing forehead than that of Catherine. But her mouth gives him cause for uneasiness, he finds it too soft; her thought seems to him rather impulsive than deep, and it is in the lobes of her ears that the Swiss physiognomist perceives the courage and the will-power of the most genial woman in Europe. In short, despite an air of simplicity which obtrudes itself on the beholder, the sum total of her features betrays, according to him, a limited and even a childish degree of intelligence.

Monsieur Lavater, perhaps in your judgment Catherine was too much of a riotous liver? You were wrong, then. She was a woman of hearth-and-home, if ever there was one, attached to her work-table and her bed. I have never known an empress who was less of the stuff of which romance is made, or more humdrum-housewifely; only, she was exacting in her demand that her meat be served to her on a golden set of dishes by a royal steward, and that her lovers succeed each other with each succeeding season. Granted that these gentlemen cost her 92,500,000 roubles (the equivalent, now, of something like half a billion dollars), the conquest of the Crimea and

the acquisition of Poland, which she stole little by little without the slightest remorse, brought back to her country far more than this trifle.

In spite of her sixty-seven years, on the 16th of November, 1796, Catherine is as merry as a lark; she has forgotten the comet. Life is good, Zuboff is his handsome self, the Jacobins are beaten, Moreau has re-crossed the Rhine with his full equipment. In accordance with her unfailing habit of early rising, she is already at work with her secretary.

It is eight o'clock; she has already used up three goose quills, and her hand is tired. Suddenly she stops in her reading of a pile of state papers annotated with the same conscientious attention to detail that she brings to bear on her pleasures, and rises to her feet. A cold sweat dampens her forehead. She turns as pale as wax and gives vent to a single groan; her head is dizzy. Hurriedly she retires to her dressing-room.

Time passes. Catherine does not return. Zuboff goes to find her. By dint of prolonged effort he succeeds in forcing the door. In the grip of a paralytic attack, half-dead, her limbs spread apart, a bloody froth issuing from her mouth, her hair tumbled in disorder, Catherine lies in the throes of death, beside the gilt

throne of the Kings of Poland, which she had brought from Warsaw in a fit of bravado and turned into her close-stool.

The Empress is in her last agony. Zuboff is afraid, and trembles. Those who courted him but yesterday are now turning aside from him. He is alone, already! Dry-eyed, the Grand-Duke Paul draws near to his mother and looks upon her with contented composure: " Let the bones of my Father the Tsar be disinterred," he cries, " and set the Imperial tiara upon his worm-eaten skull."

Where are the murderers of the late Emperor? Let them hasten hither, these old men laden with their decorations, Orloff, Bariatinsky! In his trembling hands Alexis Orloff will carry the sceptre behind the joined coffins of Peter and Catherine. On the marble is to be graven: " Parted in life, united in death." And Paul I, turning toward his mother's sobbing household, laughed a sneering laugh.

Seated in the shadow of the drawn blinds, Plato Zuboff hears the funeral procession move away into the distance to bear off with it the remains of her whose favour had raised him to such dizzy heights. He weeps for vexation of spirit. The bells beat out against the sky, escorting with their snow-muffled knell the gallant Empress whose triumphs and adventures shook Europe profoundly; who had victory

and love in her pay and at her own price, without ever having tasted throughout all the love-experience of her lifetime either the joy of being won, or the truly feminine satisfaction of playing her lover false.

THE END

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